

Jedi's Folly

by JediShampoo

Category: Star Wars
Language: English
Status: In-Progress
Published: 1999-08-11 08:00:00
Updated: 1999-08-11 08:00:00
Packaged: 2016-04-27 09:43:32
Rating: M
Chapters: 1
Words: 26,306
Publisher: www.fanfiction.net
Summary: OW & Anakin manage to find trouble in the country.

Jedi's Folly

****Title:** Jedi's Folly**

****Author:**** Jedishampoo I don't own these characters. Lucasfilms does. I makes no moneys here.

Feedback: please!

Notes: This is just a little story about a man and a boy. Well, a really hunky Jedi Knight and a 10-year-old Padawan with voyeuristic tendencies. It's super light and fluffy, except for some smut and extreme, gory violence at the end. Count yourself warned.

****Jedi's Folly****

"Youwill leave in twelve hours. Go, and may the Force be with you."

Jedi Master Mace Windu's deep, mellifluous voice rang through the Council chamber, signifying the end of the audience. To the three Jedi gathered in the circle's center, the bass tones offered the phrase as both comfort and command.

Obi-Wan Kenobi, however, bowing alongside his apprentice Anakin Skywalker and fellow Knight Jak Qado, was not feeling particularly comforted. In fact, he was distinctly apprehensive. What were the Council and Supreme Chancellor Palpatine thinking? This mission was out of the question.

But currently, twelve pairs of eyes, belonging to the most powerful Jedi in the Galaxy, were focused upon him, judging him, seeing straight through him. He thus silenced his objections and dutifully exited the Council chambers, hoping a solution to this situation

would present itself. Within the next twelve hours, if possible.

It took only a few minutes.

"Damn, what a boring assignment." Tall, black-haired Jak Qado, walking alongside Obi-Wan as they left the Council chambers, sighed dramatically. "Must be nice, being famous, Kenobi," he teased. "You get the exciting jobs. You'll spend a month attached to the most beautiful woman in the Galaxy, eating fine dinners and chaperoning lavish parties. While I, on the other hand, will spend the next thirty days with a techie, in the woods, staring at a bank of consoles. But, we all serve the Republic as best we may." He looked back at a grinning Anakin, who followed the two down the long marble hallway. "Kid, just make sure your Master enjoys himself, if you will."

Obi-Wan snorted. He knew his friend was teasing. Despite his jocularly, Qado was one of the most dedicated Jedi in the Order, one who completed all his missions well and faithfully. Nevertheless, a tinge of real regret lay hidden beneath the man's jesting.

A hope formed itself within Obi-Wan's breast. "Jak," he began, tentatively, "What if I didn't want to enjoy myself?"

The other Jedi's black brows rose questioningly. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just suppose, if you can, that having fun is the last thing I want right now. Let's say that thirty days in the woods is the most wonderful thing I could possibly imagine at this very moment." Here Obi-Wan turned to Anakin, who was staring at his master in horror, as if he'd never seen him before. "Padawan, would you please excuse us? Go to our chambers. I'll meet you there shortly."

Anakin bowed obediently but sulked off, mumbling to himself.

"Boy doesn't look too happy," Jak pointed out.

"Well. He's actually the reason I wanted to speak with you." Obi-Wan stopped walking, abruptly. He ran a hand through his shaggy mop of hair and threw Jak an almost desperate look. "I can't take that boy to Ruxe Court!"

"Why not? He's a good kid."

"Those people know nothing but gossip and greed, nonstop parties and debauchery. Anakin is unfocused and distracted enough as it is."

"I thought he was making fine progress."

"Don't mistake me, he's made great strides in one short year. He learns very quickly," Obi-Wan stated proudly. "But I hardly have enough time to work with him. I can't spend a whole month tagging along after some frivolous rich woman who's decided she needs a Jedi to protect her. Anakin needs my time and attention more than she does."

"But the Council has ordered it. Lady Omanna requested your presence from Supreme Chancellor Palpatine specifically," Jak pointed out reasonably. "Three attempts have been made on her life already. Her

marriage to Sto of Piraan will form an important alliance with the Republic. And it's only for one month, after all."

"Not so. This sort of situation has arisen constantly, time and again, since I assumed Anakin's training. One month becomes two, two become three, and before you know it, a year has passed." Obi-Wan sighed. He was reluctant to admit his fears, but he needed Jak to understand the seriousness of the situation. "The month isn't really the point. It's Anakin. He's special. There's so much raw power there-- nearly too much-- sometimes it almost frightens me. Don't tell me you can't feel it." He looked at Jak intently. "He's reaching a crucial stage in his training. I don't know where the Council's heads were in this matter, but what they ask is foolish. I need you to help me."

"Ah. You want me to follow the frivolous rich woman around."

Obi-Wan was thankful for his friend's intuition. "Exactly. If I take Anakin with me to the listening post, I can escape Holonet's scrutiny and train my apprentice in peace. If I'm lucky, the galaxy will use that month to forget my existence altogether."

"Hmph. That's doubtful. Lady Omana certainly won't forget your existence. She has high hopes for you, you know."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Obi-Wan asked, clueless. He shook his head and continued with his train of thought. "Anyway, you see my dilemma. And your place in its solution. If I can convince the Council, will you agree to trade places with me?"

Jak sighed. He could deny his friend nothing. "I will."

A look of distinct relief crossed Obi-Wan's face. "Thank you, my friend. You've done me a great service, and I won't forget it." He turned and strode briskly back the way he had come, trying to catch the Council before they dispersed.

"Specifically requested, your presence was."

Masters Yoda and Mace Windu had remained behind, waiting in the Council chamber, almost as if they had known Obi-Wan would return.

Obi-Wan took a deep breath before replying. He'd respectfully stated his reasons for refusing the mission, but so far, their faces revealed nothing of their true thoughts in the matter. "I understand that, Master Yoda. But my skills, as well as those of my Padawan, are more suited to maintaining the forest communications array. Jedi Qado can protect the Lady Omana before her wedding as well as I. Perhaps even better." He decided to be more blunt. "And my usefulness as a public relations envoy is insignificant next to my need to properly train Anakin."

A long look passed between the two Jedi Masters. Obi-Wan had to force himself to stand still, to not shift his feet in nervousness, as his elders communicated silently.

At last Mace Windu spoke. "There is a possibility you could be recognized, even away from the capital. You do understand the need

for secrecy in this matter? The Piraani must not discover the listening post. The existence of such technology is questionable enough. If the Piraani learn about it, they may not only refuse to join the Republic, but could create a galaxy-wide backlash against the Senate."

Obi-Wan knew about the post. Hidden in the Piraani jungle by Chancellor Palpatine's private corps, it would secretly monitor systemwide transmissions, looking for threats to Lady Omanna and her upcoming marriage. Quiet and secluded, it was exactly what Obi-Wan was looking for. "I understand, Master. But I can disguise myself, and Anakin and I will assume other identities. I will say he is my brother."

Yoda sighed. He'd always taken a personal interest in Obi-Wan Kenobi, but lately that young man, who had once guided Qui-Gon so sensibly, had grown disturbingly bolder. However, his plan made sense. Yoda's own misgivings about young Skywalker warned him that Obi-Wan needed ample time to devote to the boy's training.

But Mace Windu had more questions. "The Supreme Chancellor will not be pleased. Nor will the Ruxians. What will we tell them?"

"Tell them I'm unavailable. Tell them I'm ill, or somethingâ€¦ Please--"

Further reply was cut off by Yoda's quiet decision. "Deal with Chancellor Palpatine and the Ruxians, we can."

Mace Windu, unsurprised, leaned back and calmly nodded his agreement. "Yes. We can deal with them. We will do as you wish, Jedi Knight Kenobi."

Relief surged through Obi-Wan. If anyone could deal with upset politicians, it was Mace Windu. "Thank you Masters. With your permission, I'll go--"

Mace Windu cut him off. "Do not forget. If you are discovered on the planet, the Senate will be furious. Proceed with extreme caution. Send no transmissions from your location."

"Recognized, you must not be. Shave your head, perhaps." Yoda had developed an intense distaste for Obi-Wan's current, unkempt look.

"Absolutely not."

Mace Windu cocked a silent eyebrow.

The young Jedi, though sheepish, took a deep breath and barreled onwards. "If my hair is a problem, I will dye it. Anakin and I will avoid contact with outsiders as much as possible. We will not be recognized."

"Then we trust you will make good use of this time. Please ask Jedi Knight Jak Qado to return here. Go, and may the Force be with you."

"Thank you, Masters." Obi-Wan bowed out gratefully.

The day-long hyperspace trip to Piraan was uneventful for all three Jedi.

As the new official Senate envoy to the Ruxian court, Jak Qado had boarded the red ambassadorial shuttle to Piraan's capital city of Riaga. He would spend the next month at the side of a miffed Lady Omanna, making sure she remained safe until her wedding took place and treaties between Ruxe and Piraan were signed.

Unlike Jak, who traveled in style, Obi-Wan and Anakin took commercial transportation to Piraan. The two disembarked at Soochee spaceport on the outskirts of Riaga, where Obi-Wan purchased a two-seat speeder to take them to their home, four and a half ground-hours away. They bore with them little luggage, carrying only a few changes of clothes and toolkits.

Obi-Wan forced their ancient speeder a bare few inches above pitted, half-paved roads. Piraan was a verdant jungle planet. The scenery was beautiful to look at, but not good for driving. The steamy atmosphere reduced visibility, and insurgent vegetation crawled over and through the roads, breaking up the permacrete. It took most of Obi-Wan's concentration merely to avoid the boulders and yet stay on the road.

The two Jedi had shared barely a word since leaving the spaceport. Obi-Wan was irritated by the oppressive heat and bad roads. Anakin, for his part, was still somewhat miffed over Obi-Wan's decision to switch missions.

The boy couldn't remain silent for long, however.

"Why couldn't I have picked my own name? I hate An-Paj. It's a girl's name."

"It most certainly is not a girl's name."

"Well, it sure sounds like one."

"No, it doesn't." Obi-Wan was getting exasperated. "Sabe is a girl's name. Bant is a girl's name. But An-Paj is most definitely a boy's name. I knew an An-Paj, once, at Temple."

"I'll bet he was a real sissy."

"No, he was not! You're just being argumentative." Obi-Wan threw his Padawan a cranky glare as he swerved to avoid a large rock in the middle of the road. "You'll learn to like it. How about if I just call you 'An?' And don't forget to call me Owen."

"All right, Master 'Owen,' I'll shut up about the name." But Anakin wasn't done quite yet. He threw a sly look at his master's shaggy, white-blond mane. "By the way, did you know you look horrible? If you want a disguise, you should just shave your head like Master Windu. You'd look a lot better."

"I will do no such thing." Obi-Wan pushed a stray, sweaty lock away from his eyes so he could see to drive. He'd bleached it to disguise himself, but had gotten a little carried away. The ends had fried up something nasty. Privately, he knew it looked terrible, but wasn't about to admit that to anyone. "I swore that when I became a Knight,

I wouldn't cut my hair for at least three years. I have two left, and I don't care who hates it. So you can just drop that subject as well."

"Aww. Let me have a little fun. It was you, not me, who had us banished to the middle of nowhere."

"Of course it was me. I am the master, after all. Or have you forgotten that?"

"No, Master Owen, I haven't."

"Just Owen."

"Oh, OK. Owen." Anakin decided to give it a rest. He could tell Obi-Wan wasn't really in the mood to hear complaints-- his master was positively testy. Anakin closed his eyes and breathed deeply of the hot, humid air. He seemed to absorb the stifling moisture through his pores, as if he couldn't get enough. "At least this planet has good weather."

"You, my young apprentice, are insane. The weather is the only bad thing about it." Obi-Wan again pushed his damp, nose-length bangs from his eyes with an impatient gesture. His hair was at an awkward length-- too long to keep out of his eyes, but too short to pull back. And so sticky, even the wind wouldn't budge it. "The humidity is frightful. I thought that coming from a desert planet like Tatooine, you'd prefer dryer air."

"Not a chance. I hated the desert. I thank the gods every day that Qui-Gon-- and you-- took me away from there." Anakin turned a contrite look upon his overheated master. "I know I don't always act like it. Like I'm thankful. Just sometimes I missâ€|" A sad look passed over his small face for an instant, quickly smothered. A Jedi didn't miss his mommy. "And I know I'm being argumentative. I'm sorry."

Obi-Wan nodded, accepting his apprentice's apology. "Ana--, I hope that you realize I made the right decision here. Despite what you may think, you would have hated Lady Omanna's court." His face took on a look of distinct distaste. "It's full of nothing but desperate, deceitful people, with too much money and too much time on their hands. For all that they are important members of the Republic, you would have found yourself as disgusted as I by their excesses."

"Oh. Well, you're probably right."

"I am always right. You should know that by now." Obi-Wan smiled at Anakin. "Now, we can spend more time together." And now for a reward. "Alsoâ€|I've decided to begin your lightsaber training. With a real lightsaber."

Anakin's eyes widened in glee. "Wow! Really?"

"Yes, really. Though I may regret it when you slice me in half."

Obi-Wan's dry humor was lost on Anakin. "Finally! I've already built one, you know."

"I know."

"Oh. Hope you're not too mad."

"No, not really."

"Thanks." Anakin's face clouded momentarily. "Will we have time, what with watching and fixing the communications array and all?"

"Of course. We'll have time for lots of things."

Four and a half hours later, sweaty and dusty, the two incognito Jedi followed the long, twisting driveway to their temporary home. Their first sight of it was not promising. While it was situated in a beautiful, grassy area with a verdant jungle-like wood behind it, it appeared somewhat primitive. The outer walls were made of rough bark, and the windows appeared to be real glass.

—

No one, thought Obi-Wan _used glass in buildings anymore-- it was transparisteel all the way_. Obi-Wan pulled up the speeder near the ancient-looking door. The place had sure looked different on the blueprints they'd been given. With trepidation, the two got out and ascended a rickety-looking wooden porch.

_thought Obi-Wan . Obi-Wan pulled up the speeder near the ancient-looking door. The place had sure looked different on the blueprints they'd been given. With trepidation, the two got out and ascended a rickety-looking wooden porch.

Obi-Wan hesitantly reached out to touch the door lock panel. It was surrounded byâ€|metal? Examining the walls closely, he could see that the wood exterior was only a faÃ§ade. Underneath a thin layer of paneling, the building was composed of molded steel. As modern as could be. He looked down at Anakin, to see if his apprentice had noticed as well.

Anakin gave his master a grin. "It looks like one of those vacation cabins you see on the Holonet." He lowered his voice comically. "_For the galactic traveler who wants to leave everything behind but comfort._"

"Exactly what I was thinking." Returning Anakin's smile, Obi-Wan entered a code into the pad.

The front door slid open with a whoosh, and they entered a small, blue-walled hallway. Through open doors on either side of them, they could see a sparsely but pleasantly-furnished living room and a small study. Walking down the hall, they found a tidy kitchen, a refresher room, and a door which opened onto another, green-walled hallway, with several closed doors.

Suddenly, Obi-Wan turned on his booted heel and strode, past a startled Anakin, back to the living room. He stood in its center, hands on hips, a disgusted look on his reddening face.

He couldn't believe it. Despite its outwardly rustic appearance, the place was clean, comfortable, and modern. There was only one problem.

It wasn't cooled.

He searched the walls and floors for vents, hoping against hope. "This is insane. How could anyone live on this planet without central cooling in every building?"

Re-entering the room, Anakin shrugged at his master's incredulity. "I dunno. I don't think it's so bad."

Obi-Wan's only reply was a grunt. _It wasn't bad, it was a travesty_. If only Piraan had a slightly more hospitable environment, he could deal with it. Jedi were taught to use their powers to equalize their bodies, to be able to survive in the harshest environments for short periods of time. But they would be stuck here a whole month. Amid such oppressive heat as this, there wasn't much any Jedi could do.

"I'm beginning to think, An," Obi-Wan said, wiping his brow, "that I'll give you one final task before I let you begin using a lightsaber. You, my young apprentice, will build your master a cooling unit."

Anakin waved it off. "No problem. I can do that in a flash."

"I wasn't serious." But he looked at Anakin speculatively. "Uhâ€¦Could you?"

"Sure. I'll need parts, though."

"All right. Once we get settled in here, we can drive back to that town we passed half an hour ago." _We'll need food and supplies, anyway_, he told himself guiltily. "There aren't any big spaceports around, but a even a town that small ought to have a parts shop."

"If there is, I'll find it. I can spot a parts shop a lightyear away. I spent most of my life in one."

"Well, let's see how well you memorized the layout of this building, first. Take me to the communications room. We won't activate it until 0800 hours tomorrow, but I think we should get a look at it now."

"All right." Anakin was just glad Obi-Wan was normally such a calm person. He'd looked almost apoplectic for a moment, there. Followed by his master, he walked back to the green hallway, where he stopped at the next-to-last door on the left. It was a matte, grey, steel door with "STORAGE" painted on it in peeling white letters. It looked quite nondescript. "Want me to open it?"

At Obi-Wan's nod, Anakin entered a code into a lockpad hidden in a wall recess, and the door slid open, releasing a blast of arctic air.

Obi-Wan grinned a grin of pure ecstasy as they crossed the threshold. He should have realized at least one room in this building had to be kept cool. Sensitive equipment like they were guarding required temperature and humidity control to function at optimum levels. "Ah. Looks like I'll be spending a lot of time in this room." He closed

his eyes and leaned against the doorframe, savoring the chilly environment. "I think I'll set up my bed in here as well."

Anakin looked skeptical. "Good luck. There's not a lot of room."

"I'll make room."

But the boy was right. The white-walled chamber was only about fifteen feet square, and almost all of that space was taken up with equipment and viewscreens. He recognized some of the technology as standard communications equipment, but other items he'd seen only in schematic form, in their mission data.

Anakin, examining the equipment, seemed disgusted by its simplicity. "This stuff is no big deal. There's even a program to monitor and filter transmissions, so we don't have to." He looked a question at Obi-Wan. "Why do they even need a Jedi to run this thing? A techie could do it, no problem."

"Hmmm. You're right about that. In fact, I turned down the offer to bring a technician with us, because I knew we wouldn't need help." He looked at Anakin seriously. "I don't know if you realize this, but some of this technology isâ€|legally questionable. And morally. I believe the Jedi Council wanted someone they could trust to look after it."

"Do you think someone might attack us to get to it?" Anakin looked excited at the possibility. "Wow! We might have to fight! That's why they let us come here. Because you're the best there is at fighting!" Here Anakin put on his meanest face and swung his arms through the air, making battle noises and destroying imaginary attackers.

Obi-Wan was alarmed. "Absolutely not! There's no threat of fighting whatsoever." He kneeled and grabbed Anakin's shoulders, stilling the boy's wild motions. "Their reasons involved diplomacy, not danger. I had us sent here so we could relax, and accelerate your training."

"No fighting? Not even to protect the equipment?" Anakin looked seriously upset.

"No. Virtually nobody knows it's here." Obi-Wan tried to joke the boy out of his unusual disappointment. "Starting tomorrow, the only person I'll swing a lightsaber at is you. You'd better be ready."

Anakin still looked somewhat displeased, but he hadn't expected much in the first place. "Oh, all right. Just when this was looking exciting."

"Don't worry. I'll keep you so busy, you'll never notice the lack of excitement. Now, let's change and go get some food and parts, shall we?"

After a refreshing shower, Obi-Wan and Anakin boarded the speeder and drove back into town. Despite their clean state, things were again somewhat tense between the two. All because Obi-Wan wouldn't let Anakin drive.

They were nearly to town when Anakin finally broke the silence. Arms crossed and face mutinous, he glared at Obi-Wan. "Why do I need the cap? It's stupid-looking."

"Because of your braid. I won't let you cut it off, and someone might recognize you as a Jedi Padawan." Obi-Wan looked over at his apprentice's gray, knit head-garment. It was pretty bad. But necessary. "You didn't hate it when we drove over here, so what's the problem now? Besides, it's only for contact with other people."

"We could just use Jedi Mind Trick, make them forget they ever saw itâ€|"

"The cap is much easier. And less damaging to your soul."

"Hmmpfh." Anakin wasn't impressed by his master's logic. "Is that why you picked those ugly clothes? No one'll want to come within ten yards of us. Not if they have any taste, anyway."

"What?" Obi-Wan spared a glance from the road to his baggy, puce-colored tunic and grey pants. Anakin was right. They were pretty revolting. "Well, it is a disguise, after all. I certainly couldn't dress as my usual dashing self. I'd attract too much attention."

Anakin let a small laugh escape at that. Obi-Wan almost never joked. "Right. As if you could ever be dashing."

Obi-Wan gave him a look of mock hurt. "I can. You just don't see it because I don't have to impress you."

"Yeah, right. Hey, up there, on the left. With the dirty window. That's a parts dealer."

"You're the expert." Obi-Wan pulled the speeder up in front of the shop, avoiding the rusty tools piled out front.

"Yeah, I am an expert." Anakin cast his master a stern look as they climbed out. "And you're no good at shopping. Let me do the talking."

Obi-Wan couldn't argue. Anakin was right, he was terrible at shopping. Extending his arm, he invited his apprentice to precede him into the shop.

The door monitor beeped. Kettie Selva looked up in surprise from a transmitter she'd been repairing at the counter. Surely she didn't have a customer, this late in the day.

It was not just a customer, but two. Human, from the look of them. She peered at the pair through the fading light filtering through her grimy storefront window.

One appeared to be a teenager, with stringy, overbleached hair covering the upper half of his face, and several days' growth of beard covering the lower half. He was accompanied by a cute kid in a weird cap. She didn't recognize either of them. She called out to them, warily. "Can I help you with something?"

To her surprise, the teenager ignored her, turning to examine a pile of oilcans. The boy bounced up to the counter and grinned at her.

"Yeah. We need some parts for a cooling unit." He held up a small hand and began ticking off items on his fingers. "Freon coils, parafilm tubing, a twelve-two-vee generator, plasteel casing--"

Kettie interrupted him. "Sounds like you're trying to build one from scratch."

"Yep, I sure am." He gave her a smirk that would have been flirtatious if it weren't coming from a kid so small. "I can build anything."

"Can you?" She found herself smiling at his diminutive charm. "You could just buy a whole new one, you know."

"Nah. I could build one better than any that're sold." He turned and called to the badly-dressed older kid, who was roaming the back of the store. "Isn't that right, Owen?"

The kid called Owen mumbled an affirmative, without looking up.

"Owen's my brother. I'm Ani. Oh, and I'll also need some extra spanner heads, for my toolkit, and some oil for our speeder, andâ€¦" He proceeded to enumerate an entire machine shop's worth of needs.

Kettie wondered how they were going to pay for all of this. She hesitated for a moment, thinking. She didn't know them, and she rarely had customers she didn't know. But there was little chance of a robbery. She could take care of herself. If they couldn't pay, they wouldn't get the parts-- it was that simple.

Making a decision, she began retrieving some of the items. She had to ask the kid to slow down, once or twice, so she could keep up. He certainly knew his stuff.

Before long, the counter was piled full with bits of machinery. She decided it was time to say something. "Hold on for a second. How are you going to pay for all of this, Ani?"

Finally, the kid called Owen approached the front of the store. He put his hand in the pocket of his muddy grey pants. She tensed, waiting for troubleâ€¦

But he only pulled out a credit chip. "This ought to cover it," he said, in surprisingly cultured tones.

Taking the chip, she peered over the piles on the counter, trying to get a better look at him. He reached up to brush the hair from his face, exposing blue eyes. Suddenly, she could see he wasn't a teenager at all, but a young man, perhaps her own age. And not bad looking, except for the hair. And clothes. She studied him curiously as she scanned the chip. "Anonymous credit source. But it's good. All right, Ani, keep buying."

The man grinned at her then, a beautiful smile, which transformed his scruffy visage into something transcendent, elusive. Kettie felt her knees go weak.

He spoke, again, in that lovely voice. "Don't go overboard, An. We still need to buy some food. We don't want to starve over the next few weeks."

The boy wasn't concerned. "No problem. I'm almost done."

"So, you're new here?" Kettie somehow got the words out. Her tongue had become suspiciously tied.

Ani answered, coming up to the counter with another armload of tools and parts. "Yep. We live out on Road Five--"

"Anâ€¦" Owen shot the kid a look. "She probably wouldn't know it. It's pretty far from here."

Kettie waved it off. "That's all right. Everyone knows that place. It's pretty nice. Been deserted for a while." She wondered at the man's hesitation. Everyone in town knew somebody had moved in there--just not who. "So what are you doing out there?"

The man cut the kid off before he could answer. "Comm systems repair. Family business."

"Ah. That explains the parts." She finished debiting the chip and handed it back. She tried, nervously, to make conversation. "Yeah, that place isn't too bad, for an old vacation house. Lots of room. There's a nice little cold spring out back, but of course you know that..." Damn, she thought, but I sound stupid.

Owen looked interested. "Really? I hadn't seen it." He started picking up parts from the counter, and motioned for the kid to do the same. Arms laden, he began to walk for the door. "We shall have to check that out, soon. Thank you for your help, Missâ€¦?"

"Selva. Kettie Selva."

"Ah. Goodbye, Miss Selva."

Ani gave her a grin as he headed out the door, burdened with purchases. "Bye, Kettie. It was nice to meet you. And thanks!"

Then they were gone.

She watched them through the window, all the way down the street, before closing her shop.

Later, Obi-Wan and Anakin sat in their small kitchen, eating their cold dinner. It was so damnably hot, Obi-Wan hadn't been able to bring himself to turn on the stove to cook anything. But the fruit and cold cuts they'd purchased were delicious.

Anakin was happy, beginning to realize the two of them would have plenty of things to do out here. He'd talked nonstop since they'd left town.

"I think Kettie was very pretty," Anakin announced between mouthfuls.

"Don't you think so?"

"Mmm. I suppose." Obi-Wan hadn't thought she was anything out of the common way. Short, pleasant female, shirt and pants, shoulder-length dark hair, dark eyes. But he could see no harm in encouraging Anakin. "I take it you prefer those petite, dark-haired beauties, then?"

Anakin grinned almost evilly. "Yeah. Like Padme. The Queen, I mean." Then a thoughtful look came over his young face. "But I like other kinds of girls too, you know. I'm not picky."

Obi-Wan almost choked. "I guess not. You seem to have an unusually strong interest in females, especially older females, for someone your age."

"Nah, not really. Why? Didn't you used to like girls?"

"Sure. I still do. But when I was your age, all the girls I knew were potential Jedi. Off-limits." Obi-Wan wagged his eyebrows suggestively. "But I don't meet very many, nowadays. You do realize, Ana--" he caught himself, "An, that the life of a Jedi Knight is a very lonely one? You'll have a reputation to uphold. You can't form many attachments, and you can't just run about the galaxy, sowing the seeds of destruction. You have to be circumspect."

"Circum-what?" Anakin looked confused. "And what do you mean, 'sowing the seeds of destruction?'"

"Umm. Never mind about that." If Anakin didn't know, then now was not the time for that conversation. "And circumspect means being careful about what you do. How you behave, and treat other people."

"Oh. You mean, like uphold the honor of the Jedi, don't break anybody's heart, stuff like that."

"Yes, something like that." Time for a change of subject. "Now that we're done eating, why don't we go and check the perimeter alarm? I gathered from your Kettie that people are already interested in our presence here. We'll need to make sure no curious locals come peeping around."

"She's not my Kettie. And can't we just use the Force to feel if anyone comes by?"

"Of course. But we have to sleep sometime. We need to be up early to activate the comm system."

"Oh, OK. I guess you're right." But Anakin wanted to continue their earlier interesting conversation. "But first tell me what you meant, about seeds of destruction. I wanna know," he persisted.

"Later." Obi-Wan's voice was final. "Now is not the time. Don't you want to explore?"

"Yeah, sure. Let's go," he sighed. Anakin had been with Obi-Wan long enough to know that tone of voice.

Master and apprentice tromped through the grass, heat and humidity,

surveying the perimeter of their temporary property. It wasn't large, perhaps a few acres. They were thankfully quite alone out here-- all that surrounded them were miles upon miles of jungle and farmland.

Every dozen yards or so, they stopped to inspect the small, wood-camouflaged posts that composed the electronic fence of their perimeter alarm. All the posts they'd checked so far appeared to be in good working order. Obi-Wan hadn't really been concerned-- after all, they'd been set up to protect very sensitive equipment-- but he found it never hurt to make sure. He was tired and sweaty, though, and ready to go back inside. He planned on paying a brief visit to the communications room when they were done. Just to check on things, of course.

They had made it almost all the way around the edge of their property when they encountered a small stream. Unlike the rest of the murky, swampy water they'd passed on their sweaty trek, this stream ran sparkling clear in the light of Piraan's two purple moons. Obi-Wan bent to dip a hand in it, testing its temperature. Anakin was astonished when his master began splashing himself with it, laughing.

"What are you doing? Didn't you already have a shower tonight?"

Obi-Wan, grinning, ignored Anakin's disdainful tone. "Feel this. It's amazing." He cupped a hand in the water, catching just enough to splash Anakin in the face with it.

"Aggh! It's freezing!"

"Exactly. This must be from the cold spring your Kettie told us about." He stood up excitedly and began pushing through the vines and undergrowth, following the stream. "Come on. It should be this way. Must come from an underground water source."

"Not so you can splash me again. I told you, I hate the cold." Anakin wiped his face with his sleeve, but followed Obi-Wan curiously. "And she's not my Kettie."

"Mmm-hmm." Breaking into a clearing, Obi-Wan spotted the pool. It was small, a few yards in diameter, and so clear he could see its bottom in the moonlight. He stopped up short and stood, gazing at it in simple awe. He thought he might weep tears of joy.

Anakin caught up, bumping into Obi-Wan's stationary backside. He strained to see what had his master so enrapt. It was just a pretty little pond, with a grass bank and trees surrounding it. No big deal. But in the distanceâ€¦

"Hey, Mast--, I mean, Owen, look. You can see our house through the trees." He pointed a finger through the haze at the lights. "Pretty weird, huh? We could've looked out our window and seen this. Hey, what are you doing?"

Obi-Wan had wordlessly begun to remove his clothes. Shirtless, he sat down and pulled off his boots, tossing them into the underbrush carelessly.

Anakin was appalled. "You're not actually going in there, are you?"

"I sure am."

"You're nutsen."

"Ugh. What did I tell you about talking like Jar Jar?" Obi-Wan didn't wait for an answer, but vaulted into the pond. He let out a sharp yell as he slammed into the icy water, quickly smothered as he submerged.

He didn't come up. Anakin, standing on the bank and looking down through the pond's clear surface, began to wonder if his insane master hadn't succumbed to the freezing water and drowned. After a moment, however, Obi-Wan broke the surface, gasping.

Anakin wasn't impressed. "You're turning blue."

Obi-Wan stuck an arm out of the water and examined it. "No, I'm not. That's just the moonlight."

"Yeah, well, I'm going inside. You can freeze if you want. See you." The boy stomped off through the viney underbrush, towards the house.

Obi-Wan ignored him. He submerged himself in the blessedly cold, clear water again, thinking that maybe he could just spend the whole month here. Let everyone else fry in the heat, and be damned.

"Are you ready?"

"Ready."

"Then push the button."

Anakin depressed the black button on the wall of the small, secret communications chamber. He then joined his master at a terminal, where Obi-Wan monitored the computerized start-up procedure. Screens came to life and lights began to blink, all according to plan. Then the buzzing started.

"What's that horrendous noise? Is something broken?" Obi-Wan's face looked distinctly alarmed as the humming became a roaring, filling the chamber.

Anakin looked down at his datapad, then back at the older Jedi. He had to yell to make himself heard. "No. That's normal. That's the cloaking distortion field."

"Are you sure? That can't be normal!" Obi-Wan yelled back. "It sounds like the death throes of a sandcrawler! Something's broken!"

Anakin got up and walked to the door, motioning impatiently for Obi-Wan to follow him. Once they were outside, he depressed a notch on a panel. The door slid shut, abruptly cutting off the dreadful noise.

Anakin slapped a palm against the door approvingly. "Soundproofed."

Obi-Wan stared at the closed door, incredulously. "That's what a distortion field sounds like?"

Anakin shrugged and gave Obi-Wan a look that said, _duh_. "Well, yeah. That's the frequency they had to use to cloak the transmission signature. It works just like a comm jammer. The bad guys'll never know we're listening in."

Obi-Wan still looked dubious. "I've spent a lot of time around machinery, but I'd never realizedâ€|"

"That's cause you've always been _inside_ the ship. I used to have to repair things like this. For smugglers, and other blame-o's"

Obi-Wan gazed at Anakin, impressed despite himself. The boy had been through a lot in his short life. At Anakin's age, Obi-Wan hadn't even left the security of the Jedi Temple. "Well, it's a good thing I brought you here then, isn't it? I probably would have shut the whole thing off in a panic."

Anakin waved it off. "Awww. You never panic."

"You're right. I don't." He sighed. "Looks like I won't be sleeping here again."

"So that's where you were."

"Of course. A Jedi uses not only the Force, but what is provided him, to aid him in all endeavors."

Anakin snorted. "I slept fine. In my room. Why are you so hot all the time?"

"I really don't know." Obi-Wan brushed a stray, white-blond lock from his eyes impatiently. His hair was grimy and sweaty already. "But a Jedi also uses the Force for strength, to overcome adversity. Let's go exercise."

"Ummm. I thought maybe I could go into town, first. Just for a bit. I wanted to pick up some more parts for that cooling unit I promised you."

"Absolutely not. We have plenty of supplies." Obi-Wan shot Anakin a sly glance. "I appreciate the thought, but I'll survive. You can wait a few more days to see your girlfriend."

"Oooh! She's not my girlfriend. She's too old."

"You think so?" Obi-Wan teased. Then he relented. He didn't want to get Anakin too worked up, before they even had a chance to work on Jedi exercises. "Well, in any case, women are no excuse to miss training. Bring your muscles. You'll need them."

The next fortnight passed peacefully. Obi-Wan and Anakin developed a daily routine of training and meditation, breaking once every two hours to check the communications array. Chancellor Palpatine had made it clear he wanted to be informed of _any_ transmissions that threatened the Republic in the slightest, but the Jedi Council had agreed to accept the station only for the purpose of protecting Lady

Omanna. And only if a Jedi staffed it.

But so far, no suspicious or disturbing transmissions had come through. They received a daily coded message from Jak Qado, informing them of the situation at Court. Lady Omanna had been somewhat miffed when Obi-Wan didn't show up to protect her, but Jak had quickly calmed her and gained her trust. The treaty conferences between the Ruxians and Piraani were proceeding well, and no further attempts had been made on Lady Omanna's life.

The perimeter alert had gone off numerous times, but never because of any threat. It was always some animal or another, jumping directly into the electronic beam. Anakin had assumed the task of fine-tuning the system, once or twice a day, to detect progressively larger and larger disturbances.

Overall, Obi-Wan was extremely pleased with their situation. The boy was doing better than ever at his exercises. He was learning to fine-tune his skills with the Force, finding the patience and inner peace he needed to practice control. The rustic and laid-back atmosphere of the country had calmed Anakin considerably.

Not to mention calming Obi-Wan as well. Despite his impatience with the heat and humidity, which hadn't abated one whit, he was learning to appreciate the solitude of their rural life. Their property had plenty of room to practice running and leaps, and privacy enough to work on lightsaber skills. They hadn't returned to town, so he hadn't yet gotten his cooling unit, but he took swims every night and lay on the banks of their pond, reveling in the cool air surrounding the little spring.

After a couple of weeks, however, they began to run out of food. And Anakin began to get antsy, wanting to visit the town again.

He also said he wanted a real meal. Obi-Wan's limited culinary skills had forced them to survive on the simplest fare. So to reward the boy for his good behavior, Obi-Wan agreed to eat dinner one night in a local restaurant, provided it wasn't crowded.

That night had come.

"Watch that broken permacrete! This thing can only travel so far above the ground."

"I see it! Calm down." As an extra reward, Anakin had been allowed to drive. "I raced pods, for crying out loud. I can handle one little road."

"Nasty little jungle trail, is more like it." Obi-Wan forced himself to relax. He rarely let Anakin drive—he'd become too used to being the one in control. Even when he'd traveled the galaxy with Qui-Gon, his Master had been content to let Obi-Wan take care of any driving or piloting that was required.

"No, it's not. It's pretty." Anakin's voice was solemn. "Spend a few long years in the desert, and almost anything green looks pretty."

"You're right. It is pretty. As are all living things. Without life, we wouldn't have the Force." Obi-Wan closed his eyes and took a deep

breath. "I'm sorry, An, that I'm so testy. I dislike the heat."

"I know. You've said it enough."

"Hmmm. You're right. You're teaching me a valuable lesson, you know. Qui-Gon never complained. I didn't used to, either. I don't know what's come over me."

Keeping his eyes on the road, Anakin asked, somewhat sadly, "What was he like? As a Master, I mean."

"Calm. Caring. Strict but unconventional." Obi-Wan wondered if he should admit it, then decided he should. "Much different than I am with you. But our relationship was not similar. He was already a lot older than I, when I became his Padawan. And you are different from me at that age."

"Yeah. You already had all that Temple training and stuff." Anakin sounded almost despondent.

"Yes, I did. But you are special. And a good learner. Don't forget that."

Obi-Wan realized he was treading a dangerous path with this conversation. He wasn't sure where to take it. Ironically, he decided Qui-Gon would have known. But Qui-Gon wasn't here to help.

Barely a Knight, Obi-Wan had been handed a nine-year-old Padawan with an astronomical midichlorian count. Almost any Jedi would feel trepidation in that situation, but Obi-Wan knew he couldn't let Anakin see any hint of his inner fears. He had to remain confident, for his apprentice's sake. Without that confidence and control from his master, the boy could become fearful, vulnerable.

The thought of Qui-Gon gave him strength. Obi-Wan decided to display a little firmness now, to defuse this awkward conversation. "I was a Padawan long enough that I know how to treat one. And to train a good one. Don't forget that either, my young apprentice."

"I won't. How could I? Hey, we're here. And there's a restaurant."

Obi-Wan was thankful for the distraction. "World's End Inn. Doesn't sound too promising. But there's probably not much else, around here."

"It's deserted. You wanted deserted."

"That I did. I'm trying to avoid the locals."

"Welp, not many locals here. And with what you're wearing, no one will talk to us anyway." Anakin pulled up in a small, overgrown lot next to the low, unpretentiously-steel-grey building. "Can I order anything I want?"

"Provided it's non-alcoholic. I don't care how heavily you drank on Tatooine, I won't put up with it."

Anakin giggled boyishly. His earlier pensiveness had vanished completely. "Darn."

Unfortunately, the inn's outwardly-deserted look didn't hold true with what they found inside. There were people. And lots of them. _What, did everyone walk here?_ Obi-Wan wondered. There hadn't been any vehicles outside.

But the World's End was air-conditioned, which probably accounted for most of its popularity.

Hesitating in the doorway, Obi-Wan could see the restaurant held forty-seven people, either sitting at dark booths, drinking at the bar or standing about, chatting and watching a holovision display at the other end of the room. They were almost all human-- not surprising, considering the Piraani were a humanoid people. He glanced down at Anakin, who was positively delighted with the crowded scene.

Obi-Wan almost decided to leave, but couldn't bring himself to disappoint his apprentice. He waited for Anakin to look up at him, and sent a silent message. _Be careful_, the look said.

Before long, a stout, balding man in homespun brown clothing hailed them. "Ho, strangers! How can I help you?" The man's voice carried throughout the inn. Several people turned to look at them curiously.

Obi-Wan replied in a low voice, trying to remain as inconspicuous as possible. "Yes, please. May we have a table for dinner?"

"Dinner! Of course," the man bellowed. "Always room for two more! Hey, you two, scoot! Find somewhere else to sit!"

Obi-Wan started, thinking the man meant him and Anakin. But then he saw the loud fellow gesture with a meaty fist at two boys who occupied a booth along one wall. The culprits vacated their table posthaste, staring at the newcomers.

Uncomfortable, Obi-Wan demurred, mumbling that they could find somewhere else to sit. He was too late. Anakin had already bounced past his master, and perched in the booth, smirking. Obi-Wan had no choice but to follow suit.

The boisterous restaurateur never noticed Obi-Wan's hesitation. "So! Are you the two new boys out at the old place on Road Five? Kettie tells us you came through town the other day. We've been waiting for you to come back, so we could all get a look at you!"

—

This had definitely been a mistake. "Um, thanks, sir, we'reâ€¦flattered."

—

"You can call me Jame," the man beamed at them. "I'm this heap's owner, and we know no strangers here. Isn't that right, everyone?"

To Obi-Wan's extreme discomfort and Anakin's just-as-extreme delight, at least two dozen people turned and waved, voicing their agreement.

"You're too kind," Obi-Wan muttered. "I'm Owen Pell, and this is my brother, An-Paj."

"Nice to meet you!" Jame slapped Anakin on the shoulder with a hairy paw. "So, what can I get you to eat? We have menus, but I'll tell you right now I cooked up a fine toak stew earlier. That's our special today, toak stew."

"I'll take that!" Anakin piped in, smiling at the friendly man. "And muja juice, if you have it. Please."

"Of course we do!" Jame turned to Obi-Wan. "And you want that too, dontcha? Don't tell me you want a menu. I don't think you could see to read it! Haw Haw!" He laughed uproariously at his own joke. "You young people with your hair, these days!"

—

Haw haw, indeed. "Yes. I'll have that as well, thank you." The man was amiable enough, but Obi-Wan just wanted him to go away, right now. "Just water to drink, please."

—

"Water! Of course! We have lots of that! Haw haw!" He cracked himself up, yet again. "Sit tight. It'll be out in a flash!" Jame finally strode off, still chuckling to himself.

Anakin was ecstatic. "Wow! This place is really nice. The people are nice. I like it. Thanks for bringing us here, Mas-- Owen."

"I'm glad you're happy, but it's unfortunate that it's so busy. We're supposed to be keeping a low profile, remember?"

"Aww. Don't worry. We'll never be recognized here." Anakin patted his own head, contentedly. "I've got the cap on, see? And believe me, that beard looks so awful, no one would ever know you, either."

"Ahh. My disguise is convincing. How wonderful." Obi-Wan lowered his voice. "I hadn't realized the extent of their interest in us. I can feel it, you know. They're looking, without looking." He swung his gaze around the inn, lip curling only slightly. "We couldn't have attracted more notice if we'd walked in with Jar Jar Binks."

"Ha! That's pretty funny--"

Anakin was interrupted by the return of Jame, bearing a tray piled with plates and glasses. Out in a flash, indeed. He chattered loudly as he placed the food in front of the two disguised Jedi. He ordered them to enjoy their meal, then thankfully left once again.

Obi-Wan looked dubiously at the substance lurking in the bowl before him. Whatever toak stew was, Obi-Wan had never eaten it before. He picked up a fork, hesitantly. A Jedi does not know fear. He'd eaten Yoda's lentil paste. Surely he could eat this.

"Mmmm!" Across from Obi-Wan, Anakin shoveled food into his mouth with relish. "This stuff's great! Try it!"

Heartened, Obi-Wan took a bite. _Mmm. It was pretty tasty_. Better than most things he'd ever cooked up.

They were allowed to eat in peace. Almost the moment they put their forks down, however, Jame was back. And he was ready to grill them.

"How was it? Good?" He didn't wait for an answer before continuing. "So. Where you boys from? And how long you been on Piraan?"

The question was somewhat rude, but Obi-Wan decided that to ignore it would only cause trouble. Nor could he use Jedi Mind Trick to distract four dozen people.

"Tatooine." Obi-Wan picked a planet familiar to Anakin, so any questions could be answered without inconsistency. "We moved to Piraan about three years ago."

Jame looked thoughtful. "Tatooine? Never been there. Don't hear much about it."

Anakin joined in. "Because there's nothing there. Nothing ever happens on that planet that people would want to talk about." He sounded almost scathing.

"Huh. So what are you doing here? Kettie said you run a small comm systems repair place, but I don't know why you'd open one of those way out here. You shoulda gone to Riaga, or something. Only four hours away."

Obi-Wan jumped in before Anakin could reply. "We didn't like Riaga. We wanted something moreâ€¦rural. Someplace more quiet. Back to the land, and all."

Jame nodded sagely. "Yep, I know it. Those city people. Think they got it so good, but they don't know nothin' about a natural life. They forget that farming's what made this planet great." He waved a hand expansively around the bar. "Everyone in here, Birk over there, Dogle right there, they're all farmers."

Obi-Wan's reply was noncommittal. "Really."

"Yeah, we were all born on this land, and we'll die here, too. Hey! All except for Kettie here." Obi-Wan turned around and found the woman they'd met the other day, standing behind him. "She's not from here. But she sells us our machinery, so I guess that's all right! Haw haw!"

"Hello again." Kettie, wearing a short dress and bearing two ales, smiled at Obi-Wan sweetly. "Can I join you?"

Anakin couldn't move quickly enough. "Sure! I'll scoot over. Nice to see you again, Kettie."

"Hello, Ani," she said, sitting down next to the boy. She threw a flirtatious look at his master. "So what are you men talking about?"

Jame answered before anyone else had a chance. "You know. Farming.

City people. The usual." He turned back to Obi-Wan to continue their earlier conversation. "So what do you think of this wedding stuff that's all over the Holonet, with that Ruxian lady and all? Did you hear much about it in Riaga?"

"What do you mean?" Obi-Wan asked, cautiously.

"Aw, you know. How we might join the Republic." Jame put a fist to his chest. "Personally, I think it'd be a good thing for this planet. Our politicians are corrupt. They need shakin' up."

"Oh?"

"Yep. Those rich people been running this place long enough. Maybe if we join the Republic, we'll get some good government for a change. One that'll pay attention to the farmers, you know, take care of the little people."

Obi-Wan couldn't stifle a reply to that. "Unfortunately, Republic membership can't guarantee that the rich won't get richer. Or the poor poorer, for that matter." He'd seen too much of the galaxy to believe otherwise.

"I hope you're wrong, boy. I sure do." Jame shook his bald head. "But hey! I see Kettie here wants to catch up with you, so I'll let her. Nice talking to you, Owen." He turned to Anakin. "Come on, kid. I'll introduce you around. Kettie tells me you know your stuff."

"Sure!" Anakin jumped over Kettie and out of the booth, ignoring Obi-Wan's stern look. Apparently the treat of sitting next to her wasn't enough to keep him from a chance to boast about his technical skills to a captive audience. Obi-Wan apprehensively watched him go.

Kettie's soft voice called his attention back to her. "You don't sound like a mechanic."

"Oh?" Obi-Wan wasn't sure how to reply. "Why do you say that?"

"I don't know. You soundâ€¦ educated, somehow. You speak wonderfully." Pausing, she brought her mug to her lips and took a long drag from it. Obi-Wan watched in awe as she downed it all without coming up for air, then picked up the other. "Your accent is exotic. Your brother doesn't sound anything like you."

"Oh." _My, he was original tonight_. "Well, I traveled a lot before he was bornâ€¦ you pick up things, here and there."

"Really. So. Are you two alone in the world? No mother? Wife?" She peeped at him flirtatiously over her second glass. Or maybe it was her third, or fourth. _Who was counting?_ "Anyone?"

"No, it's just us men." Obi-Wan was beginning to feel distinctly uncomfortable. She was being very obvious, but he wasn't interested. Not much, anyway. "Traveling the galaxy, trying to gather a fortune. Going where the Fo-- fate wishes us to."

She looked disappointed. "Oh. You're not planning to settle here?" She took another long drink to console herself.

"No. It's very nice here, but it'll probably be temporary." He gave his arms a good stretch. "Which reminds me. We should be leaving here, as well. We have a long drive home. It was nice see--"

She interrupted him by reaching over the table and wrapping her fingers around his arm. She ogled him with her dark eyes, boldly. "You don't have to drive home. I live close to here. Very close," she emphasized. "You couldâ€¦come home with me. I have an extra bed Ani could use."

Obi-Wan gaped at her, stunned. She'd wasted no time whatsoever in getting to the point. He wondered how to refuse her, delicately. She was obviously drunk.

"Miss Selva. Kettie." He peeled her hand from his wrist, gently. "I appreciate the offer. I really do. But An and I have to be getting home. And so should you."

She was disappointed, but she wasn't giving up yet. She stared him down, desire written plainly in her eyes. "Please reconsider. It gets very lonely out here."

—

Isn't that the truth, Obi-Wan thought. The entire galaxy gets very lonely. But to accept her offer was out of the question. "No, thank you," he told her, quietly. "I have a responsibility to my brother."

—, Obi-Wan thought. But to accept her offer was out of the question. "No, thank you," he told her, quietly. "I have a responsibility to my brother."

So speaking of his apprentice, Obi-Wan stood and slid out of the booth to walk up to the bar. Time to pay the bill, collect Anakin, and get out. "Thank you again for yourâ€¦kind offer," he told the still-seated woman before walking off. "Please be careful going home, Kettie."

Soon they were gone.

"Calm yourself. Concentrate."

"Errrrgh! I'm trying!" Anakin, flushed and sweaty, held his blue-bladed lightsaber two-handed before him, pointing it directly at Obi-Wan, as if he wished to stab his master through the heart.

"No, you're not." Obi-Wan was sweating too, hair dripping in his eyes, but from the heat and not exertion. Casually, he waved Qui-Gon's green lightsaber round and round the tip of Anakin's outthrust blade, almost as if he were taunting the boy. The blades, even at low practice power, hissed sharply at every minor contact.

"I don't understand how you can even see! You must just be lucky." Anakin was getting frustrated. No matter how hard he tried to nail Obi-Wan, he never even came close.

"I don't need my eyes to see you. I'm using the Force, as you should be doing." Obi-Wan spoke calmly, waving his saber with practiced

nonchalance. "At Temple, I had to fight other boys blindfolded. In a room with obstacles. Be glad I don't slap a blindfold on you."

"I'll bet you were a showoff," Anakin mumbled under his breath. He took a swipe at Obi-Wan's left side.

"As a matter of fact, I was. Yoda used to give me extra meditations because of it." Obi-Wan blocked the blow easily, using the sideways momentum of Anakin's swing to knock the boy's blade past his cheek, nearly singeing his ear.

"Whoa!" Angry at the near miss, Anakin blindly slashed out, one-armed, at his master's legs.

Obi-Wan leapt the blue arc easily. "No, An. Don't attack. I'm the stronger fighter. You must be defensive. Try to wear me down." Suddenly, he swooped his blade straight down at Anakin's head, as if he were trying to cleave it in half. Anakin barely blocked it, holding with all his physical strength, as the blades sparked and sizzled off one another.

"Good. Strong wrist out, other wrist supporting." Obi-Wan backed up and switched off the power to his weapon. "But you're not using the Force. Power down for a moment. Breathe."

Fuming, Anakin did as he was asked. He knew the routine. Arms down, eyes closed, deep breaths. As the pounding of his heart slowed, the red haze behind his eyes began to clear away.

"That's good. Breathe. Calm." Obi-Wan spoke the words softly, wanting Anakin to feel, rather than hear them. "You can't let yourself get so frustrated. You're learning very well. Accept the speed of your progress. A Jedi knows his own strengths and weaknesses."

Anakin opened his eyes at that. "I want to do better."

"You will."

"Will I ever be as good as you?"

"Of course. But you must be patient. It took many years of practice to get where I am today. And I still have room to improve."

"Yeah, right. How could you get better? You killed a Sith lord! Sliced him up. Whoosh!" Anakin swung his non-ignited handle in a wide arc.

"Anakin!" Obi-Wan was so appalled, he forgot his apprentice's nickname. "I almost died! Qui-Gon did die! That wasn't glorious! That was the most horrible thing I ever faced in my life!" He felt ill. Hadn't Anakin learned anything? Obi-Wan closed his eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. If he ever needed to be calm, it was now. "You must understand. I have only the Force, and my training, to thank for my survival."

Anakin was chagrined at his own outburst. The look on Obi-Wan's face had frightened him for an instant. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring up you know." He peered up with a contrite expression. "I really did understand what you said, about training. I'll try to be more patient."

Obi-Wan wanted to forget the whole thing. "I accept your apology. Let's sit for a moment, and we'll both calm down."

"Yessir."

A few minutes passed while the two Jedi sat in the grass, cross-legged, eyes closed and silent. Anakin did as he had been taught, relaxing his muscles, letting his anger and frustration slip away into the breeze. He was truly sorry to have upset Obi-Wan. But sometimes his master could be soâ€|soâ€|humble. Having been a slave most of his life had given Anakin a distaste for humility. He was determined to learn how to do it right, though, if it meant being as strong as Obi-Wan. Anakin inhaled, and exhaled, slowly, pulling the breaths deep. As he relaxed, he could sense the Force, returning to him, filling him with strength.

Obi-Wan felt Anakin's focus returning. He could feel the gathering Force, breaking from the boy in waves. The incredible power of it sent shivers up his spine. _Oh, Master, what did you get us into_? he wondered briefly.

He shook the thought away. He knew Anakin was ready. Without warning, Obi-Wan leapt to his feet, igniting his lightsaber and swinging the green blade hard.

In tune with the Force, Anakin anticipated his master's move an instant before he made it. The boy was up already, blade in hand, blocking Obi-Wan's swing. Without conscious thought, he spun on one small heel and deflected two more swift blows from Obi-Wan's sudden attack.

At that, Obi-Wan broke off his assault and stepped back, powering down his blade once more. He looked upon Anakin approvingly. "Verrrry nice. I really went for you there. See what you can do when you concentrate?"

Anakin only grinned in reply.

A beeping from Obi-Wan's communicator, laying in the grass a few feet away, startled them both. Obi-Wan moved to shut it off.

Anakin rolled his eyes. "Perimeter alert. Again."

Obi-Wan stretched out his awareness. "Nothing much. Animal. Mmmm. Large rodent, I believe."

"Yeah. Like you could know that."

"I can. Why don't you go check, if you don't believe me. About forty-two yards due southeast."

"Nah." Anakin was somewhat afraid to actually find out if Obi-Wan really _could_ do that or not. "I'll trust you. Huh. Guess I'll have to adjust the detection frequency again. I'll turn it up so high, we won't know if a bantha comes through."

"Not that high, please."

"Yessir. Oh. I was going to work on your cooling unit today, too."

Anakin still felt bad about what he'd said and wanted to make it up. "Sorry it's taking so long."

Obi-Wan assumed an innocent air. "Oh. I was going to send you on an errand, but if you'd rather do that insteadâ€¦"

"An errand?" Anakin was surprised. "What kind?"

"Well, we arrived in town too late last night to buy supplies, so we still don't have any food. I was going to send you to buy some, but I think I'd rather starve if it means I get a cooling unit."

Anakin barely noticed Obi-Wan's mild joke. "You were going to send me by myself? How?"

"In the speeder, of course."

"You were going to let me drive the speeder to town, by myself?" Anakin couldn't believe his luck. Or near-luck. "Ummmâ€¦can I, still? I promise to work on the unit, later."

"Well, I suppose. I can suffer for another few days or so." Obi-Wan shook his sweat-drenched head for emphasis, spraying Anakin slightly. "Oops. Just promise you'll be careful, and please try to avoid being overly social with the locals."

Anakin jumped for joy. "Yippee!"

"Ugh. What did I tell you?"

"Jedi don't say 'yippee.'"

"Right. Here's the credit chip. You know what we need, so get it quickly and come back."

"Yes, sir!"

Anakin, cap on head, skillfully if somewhat speedily piloted the ancient speeder down the road to town. He was glad to have gotten out by himself for once.

He didn't mind Obi-Wan. Mostly he really liked him, but Obi-Wan could be soâ€¦boring. Around his apprentice, the man was invariably calm, humble and meditative. Occasionally cranky. But overall, Obi-Wan presented the very picture of mildness. To be truthful, almost all the Jedi Anakin had met were like that.

Obi-Wan should be different, though. He was a Hero. One who strangely seemed to hate it.

Anakin knew he sure wouldn't hate it. He wanted to fight. He wanted to get a lightsaber in his hands and cut a swath in the galaxy so wide, no evil would dare oppose him. Slavers, Sith, smugglers, all would cringe in fear before Anakin Skywalker, Jedi Knight.

But no one was likely to cringe in fear before Anakin Skywalker, Jedi Padawan. Especially if he never learned any nasty moves, or saw some serious action.

As if confirming the dullness of Anakin's existence, he roared the

speeder into a deserted town. No one walked the streets, and he passed no other vehicles, coming or going. Somewhat disappointed, Anakin stopped before the food market he and Obi-Wan had patronized a week ago.

It was not open. Anakin felt his stomach rumbling as he surveyed the "Closed" sign on the store's dirty grey door. _Stale bread and leftover cheese tonight for sure_, he thought.

Life was so unfair. The one and only time he had the speeder, the credits, and the freedom to buy, and fate had to thwart him. Anakin decided to pay a visit to Kettie, to console himself. Surely she would commiserate with him for a few minutes before he had to head home empty-handed.

He backed the speeder down the deserted stone street the block or so to Kettie's place, carefully avoiding the junk piled out front. Obi-Wan would _kill _him if he added new dents to their already-pathetic transport.

Stopping, he jumped out. He barely made it a few steps before he noticed the closed sign that adorned her door as well. _So unfair_. Sighing, he decided he may as well head on back, and hope Obi-Wan would let him try again tomorrow.

Anakin had almost restarted the speeder yet again when he heard faint voices. Kettie's voice, and others, male. He stretched out with the Force, and felt several presences nearby. Behind the store. He felt danger, as well.

Peering around cautiously to be sure no one watched, he jumped out and slipped down a narrow space between Kettie's store and the next building. It was hard going. Leafy vines crawled from the roof down into the crevasse, and sharp pieces of discarded machinery waited underfoot to trip him up. As he carefully wedged his way to the back, the voices became louder. Nearing the rear corner, he stopped and pressed himself to the overgrown stone wall. He brushed cobwebs from his face and tried to hear what was happening. He stretched out again, with the Force. Fear, anger, assaulted his senses.

"I don't care what your sources told you. My father's dead, he's been dead for years, and I didn't carry on dear old Dad's business. So go the hell away!" Kettie's voice, rising shrilly as she spoke, carried back to Anakin's Force-enhanced hearing.

"Give us his list of contacts. Then we'll go away." The speaker managed to sound menacing without raising his voice. He spoke low and with obvious threat. "I don't want to hurt you, little girl. I just want the ixolidium."

—

Ixolidium, Anakin thought. He'd heard of it, on Tatooine. Highly explosive, and highly illegal. Who were these people? Smugglers, weapons merchants, mercenaries?

—

"I told you, Stupid. I didn't keep his contacts."

"Well, what did you do with 'em, then?" The man spoke as if he held his patience in check, barely.

"I burned 'em. I threw 'em out. Why does it matter? I can't help you, so leave me alone."

"Find 'em. Now. We'll make it worth your while. We got big clients, the biggest." His voice assumed a fake wheedling tone. "I don't want to have to kill you. Really. I will, though--"

"What?" Kettie interrupted him. "Are you insane? I don't have them, I don't have anything, I swear--" A loud smack stopped her frightened tirade.

Anakin had to restrain himself from bursting out from behind his corner to help. He reminded himself he was powerless. He didn't have his lightsaber, and he was too frightened to focus his powers to use the Force, even for a Mind Trick. He could only hide, fuming and silent, hoping an opportunity to help Kettie would present itself. He wished Obi-Wan were here. Obi-Wan would know what to do.

"She don't have it, Deiss. This was a waste of time." This was a new speaker. "Stupid farmers, don't know frak out here, let's just head back to Riaga--"

"I ain't heading back without the stuff." Deiss's tone was harsh, final. "She's lying through her teeth. She knows where we can find it."

"I can see you're too idiotic to know the truth when you hear it." Kettie was past being afraid.

"You don't care much for your own life, do you?" Deiss sounded disgusted. "I'd be only too happy to kill you now, but I need the stuff more. Tell you what. We'll be back tomorrow. In the meantime, why don't you find that list of contacts? You don't have 'em tomorrow, we'll take, oh, say, an arm or something."

Behind the wall, Anakin smothered a gasp. Whoever these guys were, they were serious. Oh, why couldn't he help?

Deiss continued. "Then we'll be back the next day. And the day after that. Until we have something we can use, or you're dead."

"Tell you what." Kettie put on a show of bravado, but Anakin could sense her fear. "Don't bother. Why don't I call you if I find something? Save you the hassle."

"You're too kind. But no transmissions. No communications. Client's rules. Sorry, Honey." He sounded real sorry, too. "We'll be back. Start lookin'."

They came Anakin's way. He crouched down among the vines and debris, trying to stay hidden in the alley.

But they walked right past him. There were five of them, large, human men, scarred and raggedly dressed, as well as heavily armed. The largest one, whom Anakin thought must be Deiss, wore heavy, blaster-resistant armor on his torso and legs. Straining to see without revealing himself, Anakin watched them board speeder bikes

and start them with simultaneous explosions of exhaust that pierced the stillness of the day. With a revving of engines and screeching of air brakes, they were gone.

Anakin took a deep breath and tried to still the pounding of his heart. He felt so useless. Only minutes ago, he'd wished for nothing more than to destroy evil. Well, evil had stood not ten feet from him, and what had he done? Nothing.

He told himself he'd done the right thing, by staying hidden. He'd been able to listen, undetected, to what was going on. And even if Anakin couldn't do anything about the bad guys, he knew someone who could.

But he wanted to make sure Kettie was all right, first. He waited until she went back inside, then slipped down the alley to the front of the store. He had a sudden shock as he saw his speeder, sitting out front. Had Deiss and his gang seen it? He quelled his panic. No, they'd left through back streets. No one knew he was there.

He brushed himself off. He opened and slammed a door on his speeder, to make it sound as if he'd only just arrived. He then went up to the store window and tapped.

Soon Kettie appeared, looking slightly frazzled but remarkably composed, considering her harrowing experience. Her eyes widened slightly as she recognized Anakin, but she opened the door and smiled in greeting. "Hi, Ani! What are you doing here, today?"

Anakin decided it would be best to tell her nothing. He needed to talk to Obi-Wan first. "Well, I was going to the store, but it was closed, so I thought I'd drop by. I just got here," he added, unnecessarily.

"Oh." She stepped back, holding the door for Anakin to come in. "Well, today is Venniday. You're lucky you caught me here. I just came by to check up on some stuff," she said, with a perfectly straight face.

Anakin was impressed by her composure. But confused. "Venniday? Is that some kind of holiday? Why is everything closed?"

She gave him a strange look. "No. The whole town is closed on Venniday, every week. That's why the inn was so crowded last night. Day of rest today." She asked, almost suspiciously, "Why? Don't they observe it in Riaga?"

—

Oooooops. Anakin realized he should have kept his mouth shut. He tried to cover up his gaffe. "Umm, no, not everywhere."

—

"Oh. So. Where's your brother?" she asked, nonchalantly. "He come into town with you?"

"No. He sent me after food. Course, I couldn't find any. Breadancheeseanwateragain tonight, you know." He sighed, pathetically. "Wish I could have some more of Jame's toak stew. That

stuff is tasty!"

She grinned. "It sure is. Hey, I bet he has some leftovers. I took some home with me, last night, so I wouldn't have to cook today." She looked as if an idea came to her. "Why don't you go by and ask? He lives behind his inn-- he won't care if you stop by."

"Oh. OK. That sounds like a good idea." _She must want me to leave_, Anakin thought. He needed to get home and talk to Obi-Wan, anyway. "Well, I'll see you later, Kettie. Thanks." He turned and headed for the door.

"Wait!" On the contrary, she very much looked as if she didn't want to be alone. "I'll go with you. Just let me lock up." She headed to the back of the store, returning in moments.

Anakin put on his most innocent face. "You need some more stew yourself, huh?"

"Yes, something like that."

An idea began to form itself in Anakin's brain. Kettie sure seemed scared. Maybe she was afraid that gang would come back, tonight.

And Kettie was nice. Anakin liked her. Obi-Wan wouldn't mind, surely, especially after Anakin explained the whole situation to him.

He came to a quick decision. "Kettie, why don't you come and have dinner with us, tonight?"

She looked startled. "That's very nice of you, butâ€¦|won't your brother mind?"

"Nah. He'll be happy to see you."

—

I bet he will, she thought. She was somewhat embarrassed over her behavior last night. But, still, a chance to get away from town, and to see Owen again, was not to be missed. "Well, then, sure, Ani. Thanks."

—

"No problem. Want me to drive you? I have the speeder!"

"Thanks, but I'll drive myself. I'll follow you on my bike."

"Wow! You have a speeder bike?" Kettie's coolness factor had just risen by ten.

"Yep. A four-four-ex-dee. Silver. Come through to the back, we'll get it." She opened the door again.

"All right!" Anakin didn't need to be told twice.

Obi-Wan was in a pretty good mood. Getting rid of Anakin for an hour or two had given him time to think. And he'd just taken a midday swim, which left him feeling refreshed both physically and mentally.

He'd been more upset with Anakin, earlier, than he'd let on. The boy was too aggressive-- much more aggressive than Obi-Wan had been at that age. Obi-Wan reminded himself that Anakin had grown up amid slavery and adversity, whereas he himself had known only patience and attention at the Jedi Temple. Obi-Wan was no stranger to hard work, but he'd never had time to form grudges against the Galaxy, or had to worry about gaining his own freedom.

As he lay on the grassy banks of their pond, idly watching the sunlight filter through the leafy jungle ceiling, he decided to have a long talk with Anakin that very night. There was no use trying to ignore the boy's feelings of aggression because they'd have to deal with them sooner or later. Obi-Wan only hoped he would have all the answers he needed. Surely, the Force would guide them.

Having made up his mind, his mood lightened. He took one last dip in the pond, washing away the sweat, grime, and worries. Then he decided to go back inside, where to be extra nice, he'd take Anakin's shift at the conn.

He was about halfway to the house, drying his hair and whistling, when he sensed a presence nearby. Actually, two presences.

He pulled the towel from his head to find one young boy, and one young woman, staring at him in shock. Well, the boy was staring at him in shock, anyway.

"So, you do wash that hair, after all." Kettie sounded amused, but made no pretense at looking anywhere near his hair.

"What are you doing here?" Obi-Wan moved faster than light to wrap his towel around his waist. Then, just as quickly, he shot a look of murder at Anakin. "Well?"

"Iâ€|that is, Iâ€|"

Kettie jumped in to rescue him. "Ani asked me over for dinner. I accepted. But I can leave, if you wish."

Anakin found his tongue. "No! Please stay. It'll be all right, won't it, Ob-- Owen?" He looked at Obi-Wan beseechingly. "We're already here, and the food's all made, andâ€|wellâ€|"

Having overcome his first shock at seeing them-- mind elsewhere, he hadn't sensed their approach-- Obi-Wan found his composure. As much composure as he could possibly have while naked, anyway. "I'm sorry. You startled me. I wasn't expecting guests." Another speaking look at Anakin. "But welcome. Let me justâ€|go put on some clothing. I can't host a polite dinner party dressed like this."

Kettie smirked at him shamelessly as he walked towards the house. "Thank you, sir. But please don't hurry on my account."

Anakin, somewhat recovered, looked questioningly back and forth between his master and Kettie. They were acting weird. But at least she was staying. "C'mon, Kettie, let's go inside too. I'll show you our kitchen."

She tore her gaze away from Obi-Wan's retreating back to smile down

at Anakin. "Thank you too, kind sir. Lead the way."

Anakin looked uncomfortable for a moment. "Hey, Kettie, I'm sorry, aboutâ€|you knowâ€|he goes swimming every night, but almost _never_ during the day. I didn't know, I swear."

"Hmmm? Oh, that's no problem." She was staring off into the distance, running a hand through her straight, dark hair as if tidying it. "Did you say every night?"

"Yeah. He likes it 'cause it's cold. I don't know what his problem is. He's hot all the time."

"He sure is. I mean, why?"

Anakin stared at her. She sure was acting strange. "He doesn't like the weather, I guess. Personally, I think it's fine."

She brought herself back to the present to grin down at Anakin. "You're right. The weather is the only good thing about this planet."

Once inside, Anakin deposited Kettie in the kitchen, where she offered to heat up their leftover stew, and went to find his master. The boy knew he was in for it, but decided he might as well get the unpleasantness over with quickly. Plus, Anakin had important things to discuss. He located Obi-Wan in his bedroom, getting dressed.

"Owen, I'm sorry, but I have to tell you--"

Obi-Wan interrupted him harshly, a look of extreme perturbation on his normally calm countenance. "What were you thinking? Please tell me. I can't wait to hear why you thought it necessary to bring a stranger to our home, the very place we are conducting a mission, which by the way is supposed to remain secret!"

Anakin _hated_ sarcasm. He immediately went on the defensive. "She's not a stranger!"

"Well, neither does she belong here. You could endanger our mission. What if we'd left something lying around, like lightsabers or blueprints? What then?"

"I thought of that. You never leave stuff like that lying around. You're too careful."

"One of us has to be!" Obi-Wan decided he didn't want to discuss it now, after all. He would only get angrier. "Leave me, and take care of your guest. We'll discuss it later."

"But there's something else I needed to tell you! Something really import--"

"Later."

"But--"

"Go!" Obi-Wan yelled it, stabbing a finger at the door.

Obi-Wan _never_ yelled. Anakin went.

The tension in the house had lessened by the time the three finished their dinner. They had set up a table in the living room, where the windows could be opened to let in the slight breeze. The light filtering in from the setting orange sun and rising purple moons played upon the stark white walls, adding to the relaxing atmosphere.

The delicious meal and Kettie's amusing conversation had lightened Obi-Wan's mood considerably. Almost as if she knew the two were quarreling, she had made it her mission to smooth things over. It worked.

"So, Kettie, where are you from?" Obi-Wan idly picked up a piece of cheese-- their only dessert-- and popped it into his mouth. "Jame says you're not from here?"

"No. I moved here with my father when I was very young. I'm originally from Tarellia."

"Really?" Obi-Wan was surprised. Despite her dark hair and eyes, she didn't look Tarellian. "Who'd have thought? I've been there, once. Before An came along." It wasn't a lie.

"Have you?" She leaned forward, fluttering her eyelashes across the table at him. "What could you possibly have been doing there?"

"Traveling. With my father." His blue eyes sparkled at her in humor. "Very decadent place, Tarellia."

"Mmmm. Yes. It's in the blood, I'm afraid." She rocked back in her chair languorously, stretching her arms, watching the violet and orange light dance across them. "Which reminds me. Do you have any wine?"

"No, I'm afraid not. We're rather dull here."

"Oh. That's all right. I don't really need it." She threw Obi-Wan a sultry gaze.

Anakin switched his curious gaze back and forth between the two adults. They were acting weird again. And they were leaving him out. He couldn't have that. "We have more water. And I think we have some juice. I can look, if you want."

"Thank you Ani, water would be lovely."

"Okay. I'll be right back."

As the boy left the room, Kettie shifted suddenly in her chair and stared through the window into the darkening night. When she spoke, her voice was low. "Yes, my father was a Tarellian through and through. He treated me all right, after my mother died, but he ran with an unsavory crowd. He's been dead five years, and I still have to clean up his messes. I can't escape 'em." She turned to gaze at Obi-Wan, seriously. "So. Is that why you two roam the galaxy, rootless? Did your father leave you a legacy, too, some mess to clean up before you get on with your life?"

The bitterness and seriousness of her words startled him. She'd been so light and flirtatious before. But strangely, he felt compelled to answer.

"An. That is the legacy he left me." _But was he a mess, left behind by Qui-Gon for me to clean up?_ Obi-Wan searched his soul. The answer was surprisingly simple. _No_. "But I don't regret the responsibility. I care about him, a great deal."

"Yes. I can tell."

"Can you?" Obi-Wan leaned forward.

"Mmm-hmm. You're proud of him. It shows." She shook her dark head suddenly, as if to clear it. "Enough of this deep talk." She bent forward, reaching out a hand to gently grasp Obi-Wan's bearded face. "So, by the way, how long have you been a blonde?"

She'd shocked him yet again, with her quick mood change. But he let her stroke his chin for a moment, while he answered. "Oh, not long--"

Obi-Wan was interrupted by the return of Anakin. The boy stood in the door, holding a pitcher of water and wearing a look of disgust. "Ewww. How can you touch that?"

Kettie laughed, releasing Obi-Wan. "It's not so bad. Why? Don't you like it?"

"Not really. I guess I'm just not used to it yet."

Kettie eyed Obi-Wan with new interest. "So, you're normally clean-shaven? I think I'd like to see that."

"Sorry to disappoint you both. It stays."

"Pity." She stood, suddenly, stretching yet again. "Well. I don't know about you, but it's a beautiful night, and I'd like to go outside. Why don't you join me?" She gazed directly at Obi-Wan, so he wouldn't mistake her meaning.

"I'd be pleased." He turned to shoot a speaking glance at Anakin, who still stood in the doorway holding the pitcher of water. "An, why don't you clean up for me? I'll be back in a bit."

Anakin wanted to say, _what about your water_? But he got the hint. He plopped down at the table, head in hands, watching them walk out the door. _Adults._

Obi-Wan had barely made it off the porch before Kettie took his arm, tucking hers inside. Companionably, they walked a short distance around the house, discussing trivialities. The weather, the crops this year, the world of comm systems repair. She hadn't come on to him again, but neither had she once more turned pensive.

Kettie was actually quite informed and interesting to talk to, when she was sober. But Obi-Wan carefully kept his chat neutral, not wanting to step a conversational foot in a direction he wasn't willing to explore.

After they'd made a little over two circuits, however, Kettie decided it was time to take matters into her own hands. She stopped at the side of the house and grasped Obi-Wan's wrists, turning him to face her. She gazed up at him significantly. "Well. Perhaps I should be going?" She made it a question.

If ever a girl was waiting to be kissed, it was Kettie. If ever a girl was waiting to be told to stay, it was Kettie.

Obi-Wan looked down at her for a moment, considering. Anakin was right. She really was very pretty. Her eyes were deep, expressive. The moon cast purple highlights on her smooth, dark hair, and her slightly-parted lips shone invitingly. He'd enjoyed her company this evening, very much. She'd made it very clear that if he wanted, he could enjoy it even more. _It could get very lonely, out here..._

Obi-Wan shook himself mentally. What was that he'd told Anakin, two weeks ago? Something about sowing seeds, and circumspection? He swallowed. And finally spoke.

"Perhaps it's best. An and I need to get up early. As, I'm sure, do you."

She almost huffed in frustration. "Oh, not too earlyâ€¦!"

"Well, you know how it is with growing boys. They need their sleep."

"Hmph. Are you still growing?"

"You never know." He decided to be more firm. She didn't deserve to have him play games with her. "Goodnight, and thank you for coming over. Please get home safely."

At that, she released him and stepped back, cowed but not beaten. "Goodnight, then, Owen. And thank you for the hospitality." She walked the few yards to her speeder bike out front. She threw a leg over, then sat, looking at Obi-Wan soberly. "You do understand, don't you, that I'm not just some desperate, lonely woman that clings to every man who comes within a lightyear? I've been on my own for five years. I have my own life. It's just that I've been around long enough to know that if you find something you want, you should try and get it. Life is too short, and if you don't take risks, it's worth less than nothing."

Obi-Wan gazed at her. He knew about risks. "I do understand."

"I thought you might. Well. Be seeing you!" With one last grin, she revved her engine and was gone.

Obi-Wan watched her fly off, then mounted the steps to the house. Looked like it was time for another cold swim. But he had to deal with his apprentice, first.

He found Anakin still seated in the living room. The boy had his arms crossed on the table, and rested his chin on them, wearily. "So. Did you kiss her?"

Whatever questions Obi-Wan had expected, this wasn't one of them.
"No, I did not."

Anakin shot him a look that clearly said, coward. "Huh. She was probably embarrassed, anyway. Because you were walking around naked. She saw your--"

Obi-Wan interrupted, exasperated. "I know what she saw. I was there, remember?"

"Well, you shouldn't walk around naked in front of girls. It's not polite."

"Have I gone completely mad, or have you somehow forgotten that it was you who brought her here, unexpectedly?" Obi-Wan suddenly realized what Anakin was doing. Trying to distract him from the lecture. Not a chance. "Which reminds me. We still haven't discussed your punishment--"

"Please! I said I was sorry, and I have a really good reason, if you'd only listen--"

"This had better be very good."

"Oh, it is!" Anakin proceeded to tell Obi-Wan what he'd seen and heard at Kettie's shop today. "So you see, it was important, and we have to help her!"

Obi-Wan listened to his apprentice, stunned. He'd sensed Anakin's upset earlier, but had thought it directed at himself. He'd not realized quite what the boy had been through today. Not to mention Kettie. Other than her strange conversation regarding her father, she'd given no indication that something was wrong.

—

Ixolidium. This was very serious indeed. But there was nothing he could do. Piraan was not yet a Republic world. Also, that was not part of their mission. It was very important that they remain incognito. If he suddenly decided to take out a weapons gang, well, then, that would attract notice. Not to mention the censure of the Council.

—

Would Qui-Gon do something, in this situation? Obi-Wan didn't know for sure. All he did know was that he was not Qui-Gon, and he was going to do nothing. He told Anakin so.

The boy's reaction was expected and immediate. "What? I can't believe it! They might kill her! Don't you care?" Anakin was so upset, tears were forming in his eyes.

"Of course I care. But this is not our mission. We didn't come here to break up weapons cartels." He rounded the table to grasp Anakin's shoulders and force the boy to look at him directly. "And Kettie will be fine. I get the idea she can take care of herself. Let her. I know you understand why we cannot do this."

"No! I was so sure you'd want to help! And I know you could!"

Anakin's disappointment was profound. "I can't believe you won't do it. I guess I'll have to do something, then--"

"NO!" Obi-Wan wouldn't have it. The time for leniency and caring was over. Time to play the Master. "Don't you dare. I was already going to ground you for a few days, for bringing her here. Don't make me confine you to the house for the rest of our stay."

"But--"

"I'm not joking! I want to trust you. Any Jedi wants to trust his Padawan. But if I can't, I will restrain you. Don't think I won't do it."

Anakin, shaking with anger, looked up at Obi-Wan. The older man was dead serious. Purple light filtering in through the window shone onto Obi-Wan's face, casting his bearded features into sharp relief and making him look different, older somehow. Almost frightening. Anakin realized that Obi-Wan would do it. He had the power and ability to back up any threat.

Still gripping the boy's shoulders, Obi-Wan softened his voice and expression, a tiny bit only. "Do you understand? Haven't I taught you anything? Jedi don't use their powers for attackâ€"only for defense. Going after these men would constitute an attack."

Anakin had to speak up. "But what about defending others? Wouldn't we be defending Kettie?"

Obi-Wan sighed. This was not easy to explain. "Perhaps. But as much as we would like it to be so, we are not here to defend Kettie. We are doing our part to defend the Republic. We can't abuse our power beyond that. You must understand that in this case, we can do nothing. And you will do nothing. I don't want to resort to any extreme measures to convince you of my seriousness. But if I am forced to, I will."

Anakin took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to calm himself. Obi-Wan's decision had been final. There was nothing Anakin could do for now. But later was another matter. He needed to get away, to think.

Anakin bowed his head. "I understand, sir. I'm just tired. May I please go to bed, now?"

Obi-Wan was relieved to be done with it. "Please do. Good night."

Once alone in his room, Anakin weighed his options. Would it be worth the punishment, if he could help Kettie? Like Jame had said, someone needed to take care of the little people. Slaves, farmers-- surely they needed the help of the Jedi more than did the politicians who benefited from their spy station. The galaxy was so unfair. If only Anakin had Obi-Wan's powerâ€|

But he didn't. Anakin began to think he might have to resort to some extreme measures of his own.

Early the next morning, Obi-Wan sat in the noisy communications room, checking the transmission log and viewing a holographic message from

Jak Qado. The news was good.

"Greetings, friends," came the familiar voice through Obi-Wan's headphones. Jak didn't use names, because even an encrypted and protected message could be sliced. "Things here are going well. The contracts may be signed soon-- much sooner than expected. That means you can probably return from exile a week earlier than you planned. But make a note that we'll still need to keep an eye out for hostile takeovers. It appears the competition has caught onto our tactics. I'll keep you informed. Hope things are well. See you soon."

The holo-message blinked out. Obi-Wan removed his headphones and exited the painfully loud chamber, thinking. Perhaps leaving would be the best thing for both him and Anakin. Their first two weeks here had been near-bliss, but the last couple of days had soured him somewhat on the quiet life.

Anakin was the problem. He was almost too curious and clever for his own good. If the boy wasn't constantly occupied, he had a tendency to find trouble. Anakin had noble intentions, but he often employed them in the wrong directions. Thus the boy's sudden interest in Kettie Selva's welfare.

Kettie. Leaving also meant that Obi-Wan could escape his growing attraction to her. He was in no danger of falling in love, but her overt availability was starting to wear him down. He was a Jedi, but he was only human, after all. Yes. Leaving was the best thing for both of them.

He was about to head to the kitchen to get some breakfast, when he felt, suddenly, something was wrong. He stretched out his awareness, looking through the Force. Something was missing, perhapsâ€|

Anakin. Anakin was gone.

That was the last straw. Fuming, Obi-Wan went outside to wait.

Arriving in town early, Anakin pushed the speeder to its max, nearly shorting out the ancient vehicle.

Obi-Wan would know he was gone. Obi-Wan would be livid. Anakin was prepared for that. But he was hoping to get into town and back before Obi-Wan came looking for him. Anakin would have to be very quick, and very careful, if he wanted this plan to work.

He parked the sputtering speeder in a vacant, vine-overgrown lot on the outskirts of town. He got out and walked the few blocks to Kettie's store, careful to avoid contact with too many townspeople.

Obi-Wan had shown him time and again the amazing things he could accomplish when he concentrated, and Anakin was ready to try those things outside of training. He'd spent a lot of time last night, calming his inner turmoil and focusing his energies. But he knew he couldn't mind-erase the whole town, and he didn't want anyone to remember he'd been here.

Soon he reached Kettie's place and walked in, setting off the door monitor.

Kettie appeared from the back of the store. "Well, hello, Ani. Thanks again for dinner last night." She looked pleased to see him but somewhat uncomfortable. "So, what are you doing back so soon?"

"Hi, Kettie." Anakin presented the very picture of nonchalance. "Owen told me I could come by for a visit. So here I am. Umm, are things quiet this morning?"

"Yep, they sure are. But, hey, I'm pretty busy with an inventory, so I really can't talkâ€¦"

"Oh, that's OK. I'll stay out of your way."

"Well, it'll be pretty boring around here, so--"

Suddenly, from behind the store, they heard a roar of engines like a moving explosion, coming closer and closer. After a few moments, the noise abruptly stopped.

Kettie, tense, turned a look of distinct alarm upon Anakin. "Listen, Ani, I'm sorry, but I really don't think you should be here right now. Why don't you come back later? We'll go get some lunch, or somethingâ€¦"

Her short silence was broken by an angry yell. It was Deiss. "Hey! Little girl! You knew we were comin', so get out here, now! You don't want us to have to come in."

"Hold on!" Kettie yelled back. Shaking only slightly, she palmed a small blaster from the counter and slipped it into the arm of her dusty coveralls. She then pointed a stern finger at Anakin. "Ani, stay right here, I mean it, don't move, this could get badâ€¦I'll be right back. Just DON'T MOVE!" She then took a deep breath and disappeared through the storeroom door.

Anakin had no intention of staying put. He waited a moment, then followed her through the door, her messy garage, and out into the sunlight-dappled back lot. Unlike last time, though, he didn't hide. He simply stood a few paces behind Kettie, surveying the scene with confident calm.

Present were the same five men from yesterday, and if possible, they looked even meaner. The big bald one, Deiss, again wore body armor, and the others had all pulled nasty-looking weapons and held them pointed threateningly at the petite woman before them.

Kettie, hands on hips and facing down the five huge, scarred men looming over her, looked very small and very helpless to Anakin. He thought it was disgusting that the stupid lugs obviously found it amusing to intimidate a girl. Anakin thought he might enjoy watching them face down Obi-Wan, when the time came.

Deiss was talking. "So, do you have the stuff or dontcha? I'm leaving here with something, I don't careâ€¦" "Hey!" The shaven-headed giant noticed Anakin for the first time. "What's that kid doing here?"

Kettie gasped and spun to look at Anakin. "Ani? What are you doing out here? I told you to stay put, so go back inside, right, now, I

mean it." She turned back to her antagonist. "Hey, he's just a little kid, he came by just before you got here. I'll send him away. Don't mind him--"

Anakin interrupted Kettie, ignoring the wild shooing motions she made behind her back. "No, don't send me away. I've got something to say. I think these losers might want to listen to me." He was proud at how steady his voice sounded.

Deiss started, but quickly covered his surprise at being addressed that way by such a small fry. He leered at Kettie. "Hey, I didn't know you had a kid. Is he your protector, or something? He's got guts." Deiss turned an indulgent look upon Anakin, ready to have some fun. "Boy, we got important business here. So get on with it. If we like what you have to say, maybe we won't kill ya."

Behind him, his greasy compatriots snickered.

"No! Ani, get out of here!" Kettie twisted and tried to push Anakin back into the garage, to safety. "What are you doing? Please, I'd never forgive myself--"

"Don't worry, Kettie, I'm all right. In fact, I'm not even here." Anakin waved his fingers in her face, almost imperceptibly. "You forgot something inside. Why don't you go get it?"

She looked confused for a moment, then shook her head as if to clear it. "Yeah. Maybe I should." She wandered back into her cluttered garage, heading for the inside door.

Deiss didn't think this was funny. "Hey get back here, girl, we ain't done yet!"

"You are with her." Anakin crossed his arms and stared smugly at Deiss and his gang, who glanced at each other confusedly. "We don't need her. I can help you. I can get you some ixolidium." _Darn, but he sounded confident._ He only hoped he'd pronounced the name of the element correctly.

Deiss began to stalk forward threateningly, giant boots clomping and sending up little puffs of dust as he advanced on Anakin. He stretched out a beefy arm, prepared to pound the boy into pulpy bits. "What do you know about that, kid? Tell me now, or I just give you a beating where you stand. I ain't afraid to kill a kid."

Almost as if mimicking his attacker, Anakin extended a hand as well. But his, though smaller, was more effective, stopping Deiss with the Force. Concentrating hard, Anakin slipped in a mind touch, _there_, making the man think he'd stopped on his own. "You don't want to kill me. I have what you need. My brother and I, we'll have a shipment of ixolidium tomorrow. Out on Road Five. You'll find us."

"We'll find you?" The big man's vicious face bore a look of almost childlike confusion. "You have what we need?"

Anakin almost visibly strained, trying to harness as much Force as possible. Combining Mind Trick with physical Force was _hard_. Anakin told himself that if he failed, he would die, Kettie would die, and all his planning would be in vain. He struggled for one last brain tweak. _There_. "Road Five. Tomorrow. No earlier." He then lowered

his arm, slowly, and began to back away.

One of the greasy-haired men shot a strange look at Deiss and brought his blaster to bear on Anakin. "Kid, where do you think you're going? Get back here, or I'll blow you away--"

"Hodgen, what the frak are you doing?" Deiss reached out a fist and clamped it on the other man's rifle, forcing it down. "That kid has what we need. What we gonna do if you kill him?"

"You're crazy, Deiss. That kid's weird. He just stopped you, or somethingâ€¦" Hodggen turned to the other men. "You saw it, too, didn't you?"

"What are you talking about, idiot? How could some little kid stop me?" Deiss glared at them all in turn, daring them to argue. They didn't.

Anakin took advantage of their momentary confusion to escape. He was nothing but a blur as he ran at breakneck speed back to the vacant lot and his ride home.

He jumped in and started the speeder, panting heavily but feeling elated. He'd done perfectly! No one had been hurt. He'd exercised perfect control over the whole situation. Obi-Wan would be proud of him, if the circumstances were different.

Anakin's happiness dimmed for a moment. Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan would be furious. This wasn't over yet. But with courage and the Force he'd gotten through the confrontation with Deiss and his men. So Anakin knew he could survive the forthcoming interview with his master. Then all he had to do was behave, and wait for the gang to show up so Obi-Wan could take them into custody.

"Where were you. Answer me now."

Anakin had steeled himself for this. He remained surprisingly calm as he explained his absence to his very, very angry master. "I'm sorry. I just went into town, to check on Kettie, see if she's all right. That's all. I checked on her, and came back."

Obi-Wan was so angry, he nearly couldn't speak. His own rage frightened him_. Fear, anger, the dark side are they_, he reminded himself. "Was she all right?" he finally ground out, between clenched teeth.

"Yes, she was. And I'm sorry, Owen. I'm prepared to accept my punishment." Head bowed, Anakin presented the very picture of contrite humility.

"Good, because you're getting one. And you will start calling me Master again."

Obi-Wan extended his Force sense, trying to see if Anakin told the truth. He couldn't get much-- Anakin's excessive power sometimes prevented others from reading him. But the boy certainly looked sorry.

He took a deep breath and pronounced Anakin's sentence. "You will go into the house, now, not to leave today. For the rest of our stay,

you will be allowed outside, but you are not to go beyond a ten-yard radius of the house."

"Yes, Master," Anakin mumbled, the picture of abject sorrow.

"You will spend three hours each morning and each evening in meditation, under my supervision."

"Yes, Master."

"I will hear no complaints, or you will lose your yard privileges."

"Yes, Master. Sir."

"There will be no lightsaber lessons until I decide to reinstate them. You will have to convince me of your patience and sincerity, and believe me, I will be damned hard to convince from now on."

"Yes, Master."

"Good. Now go inside, and sit, and think about how you have disobeyed me and dishonored yourself."

"Yes, Master." Without demur, Anakin shuffled inside to do as he was told. For now, he would be good.

"Repeat after me. A Jedi uses his strength only for defense. Never for attack."

"A Jedi uses his strength only for defense. Never for attack."

"A Jedi must be calm. A Jedi must have the most serious commitment."

"A Jedi must be calm. A Jedi has the most serious commitment."

Obi-Wan, seated cross-legged on the porch across from Anakin, gave his apprentice a look that spoke volumes. "Your Master makes decisions and issues orders because he is committed to keeping his Padawan alive, and to upholding the Code and honor of the Jedi."

Anakin tried his best. "My master decides things and issues orders because he wants to keep me alive, and to uphold the Code and honor of the Jedi."

"Close enough." Obi-Wan abruptly stood up. "Your three hours of meditation are over. I am appreciative of your attention, and hope it will continue. Go to bed."

"Yes, Master." Anakin stood as well, and without further speech, shuffled off inside and into his bedroom.

Obi-Wan watched him go, sighing. Since Anakin had returned this morning, the boy had been meek and contrite, nothing like his usual self. Obi-Wan wondered at the source of his apprentice's apparently demoralized state. Had he seen something in town, something that

frightened him?

Obi-Wan hoped not. He believed Anakin when he said Kettie was all right. And he was glad of it. It had been a hard decision not to help her. Obi-Wan felt he'd made the right one, but that didn't mean he couldn't care, just a little.

He ran a hand impatiently through his long, white bangs, banishing them roughly from his face. Despite Anakin's improved behavior, Obi-Wan was still in a horrible mood. He was physically frustrated, there was a weapons gang loose in town, his apprentice had directly disobeyed him and to top it all off, the heat and humidity were as foul as ever.

He decided to go swimming, to see if he could cool his body off and perhaps with it, his temper. He strode inside to his room and grabbed a towel, checking Anakin's chamber as he passed. He didn't open the door, but could sense the boy's physical presence, lying in bed. His inability to get inside Anakin's head didn't bother him. The boy had probably fallen asleep instantly after his stressful day, and besides, Obi-Wan was now ever-alert for trouble from that quarter.

An hour later, after a cold, relaxing swim, Obi-Wan's mood had improved immeasurably. He lay stretched out on the soft, grassy bank, hands behind his head, watching the purple moons of Piraan in their trek across the night sky. It was still damnably hot, though.

And his earlier anger had turned to worry. If the boy got up to mischief, was that somehow his, Obi-Wan's fault? What if he couldn't control Anakin? Was Qui-Gon correct to have asked his apprentice to train the boy, and was Obi-Wan correct to have insisted on honoring that request? And was he doing it all wrong, compounding one mistake with another, and another?

Suddenly Obi-Wan wished he were back on Coruscant, so he could talk to Master Yoda. The ancient Jedi Master was often disconcertingly direct, but always wise. Obi-Wan decided that when they finally did return, Yoda would be the first person he sought.

But first they had to stick it out through a few more days on this stupid planet. The thought made his temperature rise yet again. Why, oh why, couldn't he keep cool here?

He considered going back inside and trying futilely to sleep, when he sensed a presence nearby. He stretched out with the Force, to see if Anakin were breaking his house arrest.

But it wasn't Anakin. It was Kettie, making her way towards him through the trees.

Obi-Wan sighed, watching her. He wasn't angry at her presence-- he'd almost expected it, at this point in his very long, very stressful day. No, he just wondered how she'd gotten here. He hadn't heard her bike.

She wasn't clothed appropriately for riding, anyway. She wore a pretty, low-cut flowered dress that barely reached her thighs. Her legs were smooth and bare but for a pair of flimsy sandals, inappropriate for both speeder-riding and tromping through

underbrush.

But at this moment, he thought she looked marvelous. He didn't examine the feeling, but simply observed her approach, waiting silently for her to identify herself or state her reasons for being there.

She did neither. She just strolled up beside him, and stood, staring, down at his naked body.

After what seemed like an hour, she spoke. "Delightfully natural again, I see."

"Well, I had assumed that since this is private property, my clothing or lack thereof was not an issue." He spoke mildly, almost wearily, removing his words of any real sting. "I hadn't realized I would inconvenience anyone."

"I'm not inconvenienced at all." Oblivious to any impropriety in her behavior, she slipped off her sandals and sat down in the grass next to his prone form, dark eyes regarding him blandly.

He found her regard intensely stimulating. But he forced himself to sound blasé, not excited. "Oh. Well, would it inconvenience you to tell me why you're here? And how you got past the alarm?"

"What alarm?" Leaning back slightly and looking up at the moons, she casually stretched out a hand to stroke his chest. Her fingers brushed over his ribs, lightly, almost carelessly, sending shivers coursing through him. "My reasons are simple. I'm here because I wanted to see you. I knew you'd be out here."

Obi-Wan knew why she was here. He also knew he should get up and leave, walk away this instant. But he couldn't, just yet. He simply lay there, indecisive, enjoying the feel of her fingers as they traced gentle circles on his feverish skin. Just reveling in the touch of another human, something he was allowed so rarely.

Any minute now, he would get up and she would leave, he promised himself.

She continued. "Ani says you go swimming every night. To cool off." She leaned over, taking a deliberately long look at his lower regions. "You can't have been doing that. I know for a fact that water's freezing."

"Am I to be allowed no modesty whatsoever?" Half-exasperated, half-aroused, Obi-Wan reached out to grab her wrist, stopping her fingers' assault on his senses. "Or do you plan to examine me all evening?"

She surprised him by rising abruptly. She hiked up what little there was of her skirt and stepped over to perch on his stomach, straddling him. She leaned forward, warm hands burning into his chest. "There." She spoke in a deep, throaty voice that went straight from his ears to his belly, where it coiled and uncoiled within him. "Now I can't see anything."

He gasped, but whether it was from her sudden weight or the feel of her warmth pressed against him, he couldn't tell. He did know she had

on nothing underneath that dress.

Almost of their own volition, his hands slid up her legs to rest on her hips. He stared at her for a moment, undecided, breathing hard.

How had he ever thought her not pretty? Her eyes shone with desire as she gazed down at him, and the skin on her shoulders glowed from moonlight and humidity. Her dress clung to her delightfully, and he could see the curve of her breasts and the imprint of her nipples through the thin material. Each ragged breath she took, each small movement she made, stretched it wonderfully and brought her enticingly closer to a part of his body that wanted her very much. He was tempted to give in to the feeling, to grab her and have all of her, to let himself go. _It had been so long_ _

No. He strained to clear his mind. No matter what his body wanted, his heart and head told him it was impossible. This was his last chance to be a gentleman.

"Listen, Kettie," he began, breathless, as he distractedly stroked her thighs. He could feel every inch of their warm length, squeezing his hips--_ No_. "You are a lovely woman, and I find you attractive. Very attractive," he repeated. "But_ I can't_ I mean, we can't_.what I mean is, I wouldn't be able to have a relationship with you. This is not fair to you. I can't offer you any kind of commitment."

She smiled then, in the moonlight, slowly, seductively. She leaned down and stared into his eyes, seeing clearly the desire written there. "Hmm. You can't make a commitment, and I don't want one." She pushed against his chest, raising herself up slightly, then back against the hardness she could feel behind her. Her voice lowered to a whisper. "All I want, right now, is this. Don't tell me you don't want it, too." She maneuvered herself until she could feel the by-now hard tip of him, pressing against her intimately.

They both gasped as she slid onto him, pushing his hardness inside of her.

His last chance had passed. Obi-Wan was lost. All his doubts, all his worries, fled before the onslaught of sensation her warmth and heat sent radiating through him. His hands tightened on her, almost imperceptibly.

Pushing off from his chest and leaning back, she stared down at him with passion-glazed eyes. "Oh," she whispered, breathlessly, "you feel so wonderful. I knew you would." She reached to entwine her hands with his, on her hips, and pull them inexorably up the sides of her trembling body.

Together they slowly lifted her dress, revealing inch by inch of sweat-glowing skin underneath. With an impatient yank, Obi-Wan pulled the offending material over her head and outstretched arms and tossed it aside carelessly.

She leaned forward again, the heels of her palms landing on his shoulders heavily, gripping them, supporting her so she could concentrate on moving against the hardness buried inside her.

Obi-Wan couldn't suppress a small moan at the sweet, near-pain at her movement. He needed more. He needed all of her, pressed against him, now.

But their position, though acutely exquisite, was awkward. He could have of her only what he could reach. With her dress gone and all of her exposed to him, he began a caressing assault on her body.

He slid his hands over her hips, thumbs gliding over the satiny skin of her belly. Slowly, he slid his palms up her sides, gentle fingers softly kneading.

All the while she quietly moved against him, with him, rhythmically. He could feel each breath she took, each gasping exhalation, his own ragged breathing mingling with hers in the air between them.

With his thumbs he lightly traced the curve of her small bosoms, circling, teasingly avoiding the dark tips. Finally, he slid his hands around to cup the wonderfully soft breasts gently but firmly, massaging them with his fingers while his palms lightly teased the hard buds of her nipples.

She moaned in pleasure and leaned into his kneading hands, thrusting against him with her hips in a move that sent him deeper than ever inside her.

He moaned, at the intense warmth of her, and the pressure of her hips at his sides, and the sweat-slicked skin beneath his fingers. He slid one hand over her glistening shoulder to grasp her tenderly by the back of her neck, entangling his fingers in the damp, silky hair at her nape. He pulled on her lightly, trying to bring her lips down to his for a hungry kiss. Some part of him, still capable of conscious thought, realized that he was moving inside her, but he'd never even kissed her.

She resisted. Without breaking their gentle rhythm, she pushed off from his shoulders and arched her back, grabbing his roving hands in hers. Between her own gasps of passion, she kissed his fingertips lightly, tongue darting out to tease each one, before she pulled his hands down to her thrusting hips and held them there.

Thwarted of her mouth, he grasped her smooth buttocks with strong fingers and pulled her against him harder and faster, intensifying the urgency of their slippery contact.

Words were beyond both of them. No sound broke the stillness of the night but their ragged breathing and the gentle rasp of skin. But Obi-Wan was beyond hearing as well. He closed his eyes and spun off into a night where there was only his body, hard and lean, and hers, soft and pliant above it, and the fierce pleasure spreading a searing languor throughout him. He began to feel very heavy, as if he were sinking into the soft ground, taking her with him.

Just when each slick contact bordered on the edge between ecstasy and pain, when it became almost too much to bear, he felt Kettie stiffen against him. She cried out and collapsed as climax claimed her, falling forward on him helplessly, her face landing in the hollow of his neck and her damp hair entangling in his lips.

—

No! She couldn't stop now, Obi-Wan thought almost desperately. Never breaking their connection, he gripped her shoulders and almost roughly rolled her over to stretch his hard length atop her shuddering body. He dimly felt her legs wrap themselves around his hips as he plunged inside of her, over and over.

—

A few powerful thrusts of his hips, and he shuddered, finding his own release. Then it was his turn to collapse on her, almost in relief, as every inch of his body relaxed all at once.

They lay there like that on the grass, for a few minutes, while they both caught their breath.

After a few silent moments, Obi-Wan lifted himself from her to his elbows, and reached out a trembling hand to brush sticky-damp hair from her face. She gazed up at him, eyes wide, unsure, not speaking.

He gave a breathless chuckle. "May I please kiss you now?"

She grinned at him in relief. "Be my guest."

It was several hours before she went home.

Obi-Wan felt fabulous all the next morning. He hadn't allowed himself to feel guilty about last night. He'd woken up in a good mood, he'd eaten breakfast in a good mood, and now, even though he was engaged in meditation with a distracted apprentice, he held on to that good mood.

But he figured he'd better find out what the problem was. "An. You're not concentrating. What's wrong?"

Across from Obi-Wan, the boy sighed. He removed his palms from his master's and leaned back against the porch railing, eyes shifting around the yard uncomfortably. "Nothing."

Obi-Wan sat back as well. "Something is obviously wrong. I hope you're not angry with me over your punishment, because I'll tell you right now that I won't relent."

Anakin bowed his blonde head and watched his fingers pluck nervously at a splinter in the wooden floor. "No, I'm not upset about the punishment."

"Well, I hope you're not still upset over my decision about the weapons gang? We can discuss it, rationally, if you wish."

Another heavy sigh. "No, that's not it. It's nothing."

Obi-Wan rolled his eyes. "Well, it is evidently something. You had better just tell me what it is. Unlike you, I am patient. Very patient. I can sit here all day, staring at you if you like, until you speak up."

"No! Don't do that." Anakin finally sat up, but he was still unable

to look Obi-Wan in the eyes. He gazed somewhere in the vicinity of his master's unkempt hair, and took a deep breath. "I was just, um. I was kind of wondering. What were you and Kettie doing out here, last night?"

"What?" Obi-Wan was stunned almost speechless. He opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, unable to form words. _No, please, no_, he thought. His good mood vanished to be replaced by the guilt he'd been holding at bay.

Finally, however, he squeaked out the question. The one he wasn't sure he wanted the answer to. "Were you watching?" He winced, anticipating the dreaded answer.

"No! Iâ€|no! I wasn't! That's gross!"

—

Thanks for small mercies. Obi-Wan could sense Anakin was telling the truth about that, anyway. But the guilt wouldn't go away. "Well. That's a relief. But why did you ask such a question?"

—

"I just heard noises, so I came out on the porch. I barely looked. I swear!" Anakin gazed directly at Obi-Wan, face intensely red. "I was just curious. Were youâ€|umâ€|doingâ€|.umâ€|.youknowwhat?"

Obi-Wan felt sick. Thoughts ran through his mind, accusations, mostly directed at himself. _What kind of example are you setting? Why was it, again, you didn't want to take Anakin to Ruxe court? Oh, yes, something about decadence, wasn't it? Well, you're the one who's warped his tender young mind, now._ Obi-Wan tried to shut the inner voice out. This situation was entirely his fault. The time for the discussion he'd avoided two weeks ago had come. _Better start thinking quickly, fool_, the voice taunted.

"Um. Anakin. Perhaps we'd better have a talk." _Stupid_. "I'm very, very sorry that you had to see that. Very sorry," he reiterated. "But if you have any questions, I'll do my best to answer them." _Keep going. Qui-Gon was much better at this_. "You see, as you become an adult, there are some changes your body goes through, and--"

Anakin waved a hand, interrupting his near-stuttering master. "Oh, I know all about that. Sex and stuff. I grew up in a spaceport, remember? I heard all that from pilots when I was just a kid." He looked down again at the splinter he'd been fidgeting with. "Um. I just wondered if that was what you were doing. That's all."

—

When he was just a kid? Well, what did that make him, now? But Obi-Wan began to feel a little better. At least he hadn't been entirely responsible for Anakin's fall from innocence. "Well, then. Yes. That's what it was."

—

A thoughtful look came over Anakin's young face. "Oh. Just like farm animals. Oh!" A look of recognition appeared. "So that's what you

meant, about seeds of destruction. That's pretty funny." But Anakin seemed more embarrassed than anything.

"Oh, An. Yes, that's what I meant. And I didn't heed my own warning, did I? So you finally see, that your master is not perfect. None of us are. We are not saints, after all."

"Just seekers." Anakin finished the saying. "But I thought--"

He was interrupted by a familiar beeping. Sighing, Obi-Wan reached up to shut off the perimeter alarm on his communicator, which sat on the porch railing. But his face suddenly took on an expression of concern.

"What--"

Obi-Wan was drowned out by a near-deafening explosion of noise. He recognized the sound of speeder bikes, and not Kettie's well-maintained four-four-ex-dee, either. He turned to look at Anakin, and was shocked to see a distinct look of guilt on his apprentice's face. "Anakin! What is going on?"

Before the boy could answer, the source of the noise came tearing into their yard. Obi-Wan scanned the disturbance, and picked out five very large, raggedly dressed men on black bikes. The largest, in front, was six-foot-eight, bald, had a scar cleaving his lower lip and chin and wore body armor. The four others wore no armor, but his sharp eyes picked out twenty-four various weapons, some on the men's metal belts, some attached to the bikes.

And one of the greasy-haired men in back held Kettie in front of him as he rode in. The red coveralls she wore were covered in dirt and oil. Either more grease, or bruises, covered one side of her face.

"No! Why did they bring her here? They weren't supposed to hurt her!" Anakin started babbling, clearly upset. "Oh, I'm so sorry! Please, don't let them hurt her, I didn't mean--" A hand roughly covered his mouth.

"Shut up!" Obi-Wan glared at his frightened apprentice in fury. "Shut up, and let me take care of this. Go inside, you know what I need."

But Anakin wasn't even listening. Wide-eyed, he watched the approaching men, who'd parked their bikes halfway up the drive. One of them pushed a protesting Kettie before him, blaster rifle to her head.

Soon the gang was were upon them, and Obi-Wan had no further chance to speak to Anakin. He put on his calmest expression, and stepped down from the porch, stopping within two yards of the leader. Anakin dazedly followed.

"Can I help you?" Perhaps Obi-Wan could diffuse this situation with words and diplomacy.

The big bald man spoke. "Yeah. That kid right there told us you have something we need. We've come to get it."

Obi-Wan pretended to search his memory. "No, I'm sorry, unless you want your communications systems repaired, you've come to the wrong place. Perhaps you'd better leave. Oh, and thanks for bringing her here. I wondered where she'd gotten off to." He took a step towards Kettie.

The man raised his blaster, threateningly. "No. I want the ixolidium, and I want it now. I can pay for it, or I can kill you for it, mister. It's your choice."

"Ixolidium? I've never heard of it. I'm sorry, I can't help you." Obi-Wan steeled his voice. "Now, like I asked. Please go. And please leave the woman, if you will."

Kettie, obviously frightened out of her wits, spoke up suddenly. "I told you they don't have it, Deiss. Coming here was a waste of time. Let's go back to my place." She turned a beseeching, desperate look upon Obi-Wan. "Owen, I'm sorry! I told them you didn't have that kind of stuff, I told them they were crazy, but would they listen? No. But I swear, I didn't tell them to come here, I'm sure Ani didn't either--"

A growl from Deiss drowned out her babbling. "Rinn? She's getting on my nerves. Shut her the frak up, would you?"

The greasy-haired thug called Rinn snorted gleefully and pulled the trigger on his blaster rifle. With an ear-splitting boom the weapon discharged and blew Kettie's head to pieces, splattering her blood and brains all over Obi-Wan and Anakin.

Her headless, smoking body stumbled forward a few halting steps, only to fall, finally, catching Anakin on the shoulder as the boy tried desperately to wipe gore from his eyes. Anakin screamed and took a stumble, falling on her still-twitching corpse.

Almost the same instant the killing blast erupted, Obi-Wan was in motion. Merely a blur, he moved on the man who'd fired the shot. He yanked the killer's blaster from his hand and in one fluid motion, had the man in a headlock and the blaster jammed into his temple. Surveying the group, he tried to use the Force to end this, here, to tell them to leave before there was more bloodshed.

But the men were too stunned and angry to succumb, and Obi-Wan himself too unfocused. There was Kettie, on the ground, he was covered in her blood, was it only last night they'd— And Anakin was howling, sobbing, sending out waves of fear and sorrow that almost knocked Obi-Wan off his feet. He settled for yelling harshly at his apprentice, hoping to calm him enough to get what Obi-Wan needed.

"Anakin!" Once Obi-Wan had the boy's attention, he screamed into his mind. Lightsaber, lightsaber, lightsaber! he sent, over and over, hoping his apprentice would understand.

Anakin forced himself up from Kettie's bloody remains, and took off into the house, blubbering.

Obi-Wan turned his attention back to the group of men. Only a few seconds had passed, and they stood, stunned, wondering how this nondescript fellow had moved so quickly. But they were getting

angrier, fast. Time to defuse this, now. "Why don't I hold your friend, here, until the rest of you get _off my property!_" Obi-Wan said, yelling at the last. "Now!"

Deiss simply growled. "Kill him."

The four remaining men began firing wildly at Obi-Wan, not caring whether they hit their compatriot or not. Before long, Obi-Wan's human shield was turned into a useless, screaming, steaming piece of meat by his own gang's fusillade. With a grunt, Obi-Wan heaved the blaster and the smoking husk onto the nearest thug and advanced, ducking and grappling to bring the man down.

The big human reacted more quickly than Obi-Wan anticipated, throwing off his bloody pal and grabbing Obi-Wan's arm, trying to twist it. As they struggled they turned sideways, and Deiss found a clear shot at Obi-Wan's head. He fired.

Anticipating the blast, Obi-Wan suddenly jerked his arm up, yanking the man's grabbing fist with it. Deiss's shot hit his own man's hand, and the shrieking gunman released Obi-Wan, cradling his injured arm.

Snapping out a leg with a powerful thrust, Obi-Wan kicked the howling greaseball, knocking him into the line of his buddies' red and green blaster bolts. The front of the idiot's face exploded in eyeballs, teeth and greasy hair as friendly fire pounded the back of his head.

Obi-Wan wasted no time. He flipped backwards from the faceless horror in a blur, stretching his hand outward. Anakin had appeared on the porch, bearing Obi-Wan's lightsaber at last. He wrenched it from the boy's hand with a Force grip, and it sailed smoothly into Obi-Wan's waiting grasp as he landed.

Immediately, the green blade ignited, deflecting the barrage of blaster shots. Obi-Wan angled his saber, trying to send the shots at the leader, the most obvious threat. It was no use. Deiss's body armor withstood the fire.

With a downward swipe, Obi-Wan bounced one ricochet at Deiss's twitching trigger finger, sending the heated blaster flying. With a feral bellow, the huge man backed off, turned and ran for his bike.

The other two remained, still firing futilely at the Jedi who'd now easily decimated their ranks by two. They flanked Obi-Wan, trying to catch him in crossfire but unable to hit him for the arcing green blade.

Hodgen, on the left, suddenly noticed the kid vomiting off the side of the porch. He swung his arm, preparing to take the brat out with a well-placed laser to the brain.

Obi-Wan noticed instantly. He'd tried, so far, not to kill anyone directly. He had been consoling himself with the fact that both dead men had been murdered by their own. But now, his apprentice, unprotected, was in danger. He couldn't have that. The gauntlet had been thrown.

Steely-eyed beneath his wild hair, Obi-Wan strode purposefully toward Anakin's threat on the left. Almost carelessly, he swung his hissing green blade outward, one-handedly deflecting a shot from the man on the right. The seemingly casual swipe sent the red blast home, embedding it in the throat of the man who'd fired it. The man dropped his smoking blaster and wrenched his hands to his shredded throat, gurgling, trying vainly to stop the spurting flow of blood between his fingers.

Having neutralized one threat, Obi-Wan still advanced inexorably to the left. Swinging his blade back inwards, he fell upon Hodgen in a bare instant. The man, helpless, stared into the glowing green shaft that came for him, seeing his own death in its cold depths. Obi-Wan's killing instrument sliced down and through him effortlessly, sizzling, cleaving him in half at mid-thigh. As Hodgen fell forward, moaning in fear and pain, Obi-Wan grasped the handle of his weapon with both hands and turned it straight down. He ruthlessly thrust the hissing blade into the man's head, pinning him to the gore-splattered ground and putting him out of his misery.

Barely winded, Obi-Wan turned to check on Anakin. He hoped he still had a living, breathing apprentice to show for all this.

The boy stood on the steps, done retching but still covered in gore, bloody tears running in rivulets down his cheeks. "I'm so sorry, Obi-Wan, I'm so so-sor-sorry!" he choked. Anakin wiped his eyes, then suddenly turned his head, looking in the direction of the drive.

Immediately, Obi-Wan heard a booming, harsh voice call from behind. "Hey, Jedi! Deflect this!"

Obi-Wan spun, blade ready, but instantly retracted it at what he saw. Deiss stood, by the bikes, holding a rocket launcher on his shoulder. Obi-Wan turned and grabbed Anakin, hauling him off the porch under his arm.

They barely made it. With a concussive blast that slammed them to the ground, the front of the house exploded outwards in a giant ball of flame and flying shards of building material. Feeling the searing heat at his back, Obi-Wan picked up his apprentice again and tried to run for cover.

Deiss gave them no time. He fired again and again, four more shots that took out their speeder, a tree, and more of the house. The unlucky fellow who still stumbled about, holding his gushing throat, took the fourth shell in his back and exploded outwards in a sickening spray of bone, clothing and smoking entrails. His head, untouched, was sent rocketing into the sky by the force of the blast that had decimated his body.

Dodging a sixth shell, Obi-Wan decided he'd had enough. He dropped his screaming apprentice roughly onto the grass and stood, facing Deiss, arm outstretched. He spoke one word into the smoky haze that engulfed them both. "Stop."

Deiss chuckled maniacally. "You're crazy, Jedi. I ain't stopping till you're dead." So saying, he sighted along his huge weapon at Obi-Wan and pulled the trigger. A rocket erupted with a boom from the weapon's end, heading straight for Obi-Wan's unmoving head.

Face set, Obi-Wan gathered all his strength. With the Force as his ally, he grabbed the shell in midair, mere inches from his nose. With a flick of his wrist and a grunt of disgust, he sent the shell back home.

Deiss stared in horror as his own missile flew back at him. He watched, almost entranced, as the rocket re-entered the smoking whole from whence it had sprung. He never moved as the launcher detonated, obliterating his entire torso in a ghastly ball of destructive flame. Even after the rest of him had atomized, his armored hips and legs remained standing in place, unmoving.

Until the head returned. Whistling through the air, the gaping bloody head that had been blown into the sky reappeared, caught in the grip of gravity. In a gruesome irony, the skull impacted against the armor with an incongruously innocent metallic clang. The statue-like legs wavered for a moment, then fell over with a dull thud.

An eerie silence pervaded their yard in the aftermath of the wanton destruction, broken only by a sparking and hissing in the ruins of their house.

Four minutes. Six were dead, their house and speeder were in shambles, and the whole thing had taken less than four minutes.

Anakin stood, shivering, on the remains of the porch, staring at his master with something like fear. The cold, deadly efficiency with which Obi-Wan had dispatched the gang had been horrific to see. And with his clothes bloody, hair and beard dripping with gore, Obi-Wan didn't look at all like himself.

As his master turned to him, a look of near-fury in his eyes, Anakin began crying again, softly. "I-I-I didn't know! It was s-so horrible! All that blood. Kettie. Oh, I didn't know!" He sobbed, helplessly, alternately gulping air and wailing.

Obi-Wan took deep, calming breaths and watched his apprentice silently. Anakin had caused all this. But the boy already knew that. He didn't need his master to tell him. Obi-Wan felt the waves of sorrow, horror and regret emanating from Anakin. He realized the boy had been punished enough, for this at least.

Wordlessly, he looked up at Anakin, arms outstretched.

The boy lost his fear of his master, then, and ran down the steps to cling to him. He still couldn't speak, but buried his face in Obi-Wan's crimson-stained shirt and wept noisily.

"It is horrible, isn't it? I don't think you believed me until now." Obi-Wan spoke softly. He gazed numbly at the carnage around him, eyes alighting only briefly on Kettie's headless body. His heart constricted at the sight and he pulled his eyes resolutely down to Anakin's head pressed against his chest. "Killing is not glorious. It is messy. Even in self-defense. And every life you take is forever imprinted on your soul."

"I'm sorry," Anakin whispered against Obi-Wan's shirt. It was all he could say.

"I know." But Obi-Wan could only give so much comfort. This wasn't over quite yet. "Stand back. There. Breathe. Calm yourself, like I taught you. Good. I need you functioning, not blubbering."

"Yes, Master." Anakin took a deep breath and wiped his eyes. He had to ask. "Will I ever have to do that?"

"I wish I could tell you no. But I can't. I can only hope not." Obi-Wan steeled himself. They didn't have time to discuss it. "Now. Go, and search the front rooms of the house. See what's left, that we need to take with us."

"Yes, sir." Anakin left to rummage in the remains of their home. A few minutes later he returned, carrying only his lightsaber and a half-melted data card. He found his master at the side of the house. "This is all that was left. Everything else was blown to bits." He looked sick at his own words.

"Good. Now stand back. There's something we need to do." Obi-Wan held a large blaster rifle he'd scrounged from the dead gang's bikes. He pointed at an unused rocket from Deiss's destroyed launcher. It lay on the ground, next to a gaping hole in the wall of the half-intact communications room. "We can't take it with us, but we can't leave it, either."

Anakin understood. The equipment was no longer functioning, its power source having been destroyed. But people would soon come by to investigate the explosions. They couldn't be allowed to discover this technology.

Anakin stood back and watched silently as Obi-Wan fired the blaster at the rocket. The room went up in one last fireball, raining more wires and electronics over the bloodbath that had once been their yard. With a flick of his wrist, Obi-Wan tossed the blaster aside. The two Jedi then made their way to the speeder bikes, both wanting only to escape from here, and fast.

Half a day later, exhausted but clean of the blood, if not its memory, Obi-Wan and Anakin crept through a window into Jak Qado's quarters in Riaga. The man himself jumped from a chair at their entrance, surprise written plainly on his darkly-bearded face. "What are you two doing here? The wedding isn't for another week! Didn't you get my last message?"

Obi-Wan ran a hand through his tangled hair, sighing. So many explanations. "Something unexpected happened. I need to speak to the Council, immediately. Can you contact them for me?"

"Of course," Jak agreed without hesitation. He trusted Kenobi. Whatever had happened, it had to be important or they wouldn't be here. "I'll call them, now. Can you at least tell me, does it impact our mission here? Should I be prepared for anything? Otherwise, I wouldn't ask."

Obi-Wan chuckled morosely. "Not unless you expect the ghosts of a dead weapons-smuggling gang to attack us here. We weren't followed by anyone living." He brushed a hand over his face and straightened his borrowed clothing. Their own clothes soaked with blood and credit chip lost, they'd been forced to raid an unsuspecting clothesline.

They hadn't found an exact fit, but at least they were covered. "How do I look? Will the Council recognize me?"

Jak grinned. "You look like the living dead yourself. Both of you. But wait a minute. Did you say weapons gang? This wouldn't have anything to do with one Jenker Deiss, would it?"

Both Obi-Wan and Anakin started at the name. They shared a significant look before Obi-Wan turned back to Jak. "We tangled with a Deiss, yes. Why?"

"Well, if you killed him, you've done us all a favor. Republic Intelligence has been looking for that man for days. Remember that message I sent, about hostile takeovers?" At Obi-Wan's nod, he continued. "We received word a gang was working with the Piraani government resistance, plotting to blow up the wedding. Rumor had it they were only looking for--"

Obi-Wan interrupted him. "Let us guess. Anakin?"

The boy spoke softly. "Ixolidium."

Jak was amazed. "Exactly. RI couldn't find them, because they avoided all communications channels. But it appears you ran into them yourselves. What a coincidence," he added, shaking his head. "The Force works in mysterious ways."

"That it does, my friend. That it does. Now." Obi-Wan took a deep breath. "On to the Council."

"Good afternoon, Jedi Knight Kenobi. Padawan Skywalker. Why are you not at your post?"

Mace Windu's voice was surprisingly calm, considering the way he'd been contacted. And considering the raggedy appearance of the two wayward Jedi who bowed holographically on the marble floor before him.

But Obi-Wan had expected no less. "Hello, Master. The communications array has been completely destroyed. My Padawan and I traveled here, secretly, to inform you and arrange transport off-planet. No one but Jedi Qado knows we are here."

There was silence for a moment, while Windu considered Obi-Wan's words. Then another voice spoke, from beside him.

"More there is, that you do not tell us." Yoda, as always, read between the lines.

Obi-Wan sighed. "Yes, Master. We encountered a gang of weapons smugglers. They murdered an innocent and threatened our lives. I killed them."

Another voice joined the conversation. It was Ki-Adi-Mundi. "You hide even more, Jedi Kenobi. You are agitated, and your Padawan moreso."

Obi-Wan began to wonder just how many Jedi Masters he was confronting. The only one he could see directly was Windu. "Yes, Master. But if you would please send a transport, we will discuss

this with you in person the instant we arrive on Coruscant."

There was a silence on Obi-Wan's and Anakin's end of the transmission while the Jedi Masters discussed the situation. Finally, Mace Windu turned back to them. "You will remain in Riaga until the wedding and the completion of the talks. We will not send a transport."

Obi-Wan was startled and dismayed. "But, Masters, we are not expected--"

"Then your presence at Court will come as a pleasant surprise to Lady Omanna and the Supreme Chancellor," Mace Windu spoke wryly. "Since your replacement mission failed, you will have the chance to assist Jedi Qado in completing your original."

"But how will I explain my presence here? And what do I tell Chancellor Palpatine about the destroyed communications array?"

"As to explaining your presence, we will leave that to you." Windu turned his head for a moment, as if listening to a voice out of view. He then returned his attention to the two holographic Jedi. "And do not inform the Supreme Chancellor as of yet. He will find out soon enough. We will deal with that, when the time comes."

Obi-Wan was surprised, but came to a sudden realization. The Council were not very disappointed about the destruction of the communications array. In fact, he would have guessed they were quite pleased. But that didn't mean he was off the hook, yet. "Thank you, Masters. One last thing, if you please. Where did you tell him I was? I will need to know if I am to explain my sudden appearance."

Windu answered. "We simply told him you were unavailable. We trust you to think of a satisfactory explanation."

What that meant was, _you caused this mess, so you can help clean it up_. Obi-Wan bowed respectfully. "Thank you again, Masters."

"You are welcome. May the Force be With You." Windu ended the communication.

Obi-Wan sighed and turned to bow at Jak, who'd watched the interview from across the room. "Sir. Your helpers have arrived." He swiped a hand through his hair, smiling ruefully. "Damn. All my lovely hair will have to go. The beard, too."

Anakin, who had remained silent during the transmission, spoke up at that. "Why, Master? I thought you liked it?"

Obi-Wan sent his apprentice a significant look. "Well. Since we are to remain on Piraan, we will be thrust once again into the public eye. Don't forget, Kettie wasn't the only person we met in that town. We don't want anyone to recognize the two young men who created a smoking scene of carnage and didn't bother to leave an explanation."

"Oh," Anakin answered quietly. So Obi-Wan's hair was yet another thing he had to feel guilty about.

Jak looked at them with interest. "Was it that bad?"

Obi-Wan was solemn. "Yes. I will tell you about it, later. For now, though, could you please find us some decent clothing? We have no credits. And may we borrow your room to clean up?"

"Of course. " The dark-haired man grinned, and bowed out. "The scissors and razor are in the refresher room, second drawer from the bottom."

"Thank you so much, my friend." Obi-Wan managed to sound not the least bit sarcastic.

Once they were alone, he turned and crouched to face his apprentice. "Listen, Anakin. We haven't had time to talk. And now, it appears, we are to be kept busy once again. I'm very sorry, but I have to ask. Can I count on your obedience and cooperation for the coming weeks? You understand I don't ask this lightly."

Anakin nodded sadly at Obi-Wan. "Yes, Master. I don't want to fail again. Or kill anyone else."

Obi-Wan almost felt sorry for Anakin, because the boy looked so pathetic. Almost. Anakin had blundered, badly. But Obi-Wan reminded himself that he was hardly blameless.

"Listen to me. We both made many mistakes here. You understand what mine was. I feel responsible for her death as well."

Anakin was appalled. "But that was my fault! If I hadn't--"

Obi-Wan cut him off. "I realize now, that if I could go so far as to become involved with her, I should also have been able to help her when she needed it. But I didn't, did I?"

"No." Anakin spoke very quietly.

"And you realize what your mistakes were."

"Yes."

"We can't do anything about them now. We must simply learn, and strive not to repeat them."

Some of Anakin's old insouciance peeped through. "Huh. Well, you can bet I won't do anything like that again. Ever."

Obi-Wan snorted. "I can only pray that you don't." He stood and swatted Anakin on the back. "Now go take a shower. You stink."

"Yeah, right. Like you're any better. Yuck."

"Don't insult your master."

"Well, you're not!"

"GO!"

Anakin went.

End
file.